

**Control and Care: The Inherent Antagonism in the Identity Transformation of Indigenous Women During Reintegration**

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*“Have some fire. Be unstoppable. Be a force of nature. Be better than anyone here, and don't give a damn what anyone thinks” – Dr. Christina Yang*

## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis examines the identity transformation experience of formerly incarcerated Indigenous women during reintegration. Reintegration is a pivotal carceral stage for Indigenous women, as it represents constraints *and* opportunities in discovering personhood outside the confines of the prison. However, mainstream criminological literature tends to focus on Indigenous women's entry into prison, resulting in less attention being placed on their navigation of post-carceral life. To address this gap, I draw on archival data (i.e., government testimonies, oral histories, podcasts and memoirs) to provide an in-depth analysis of Indigenous women's reintegration experience through the lens of identity transformation. This thesis theorizes the space of reintegration in a nexus of antagonism between settler colonialism and Indigenous cultural resurgence. Within this framework, this project situates and explores how these two forces meet and collide upon Indigenous women's identity formation during reintegration. I argue that while settler colonial attempts of control manifest as Indigenous women navigate their sense of self during reintegration, it is kinship-based resurgence that has a more powerful role in supporting Indigenous women's identity transformation. Collectively, this thesis contributes to ongoing discussions in Indigenous scholarship that emphasize the need to highlight Indigenous women's resilience and agency in the face of settler colonial attempts at domination.

## **INTRODUCTION TO THESIS**

Reintegration – the process by which individuals exit prison and transition back into society (Visser & Travis, 2003)— is a foundational stage for formerly incarcerated Indigenous women. While reintegration is commonly viewed as a bureaucratic process comprising lengthy approvals, procedures, and management, it nonetheless reflects and involves broader social issues such as connection and identity. For formerly incarcerated Indigenous women, identity is significant, as it is through a sense of being that women understand their roles in this lifetime, reconnect with their communities, and practice Indigenous notions of womanhood that reaffirm their power (Simpson, 2017; Anderson, 2016). However, identity formation post-carceral release is shaped by the complexities of reintegration itself. On the one hand, reintegration often extends the prison’s institutional control into the seemingly neutral and ‘free’ space of community reunification, meaning reintegration increases the state’s ability to continue to regulate Indigenous women’s identity in accordance with settler colonial objectives. At the same time, however, this period of re-entry also reflects an opportunity for individuals to (re)connect with the communities and networks they might have lost while incarcerated. This reunification is significant as it opens pathways for Indigenous women to establish important kinship relationships and engage in acts of cultural resurgence. In many cases, these experiences lead to reaffirming of a sense of self that is not dictated by the carceral state. Reintegration, therefore, involves competing dynamics and interests that Indigenous women must navigate when outside the formal space of the prison.

Recognizing the significance of re-entry, scholars have investigated the structural systems and mechanisms that shape reintegration and its impact on the lives of formerly incarcerated populations. This includes over-policing, parole conditions, and civic disenfranchisement, which

collectively create difficulties in returning to society after incarceration. However, studies have highlighted that Indigenous women experience such processes in a way that is connected to broader histories of racialization, sexism, and settler colonialism in Canada (McGuire et al, 2022; George et al., 2020; Chartrand, 2019). As a result, reintegration scholarship that focuses on Indigenous women has tended to emphasize the structural manifestations of settler colonialism and domination and ultimately stresses how the state's role in re-entry reduces opportunities for Indigenous women to engage in a meaningful reintegration. Said differently, although certain aspects of reintegration (i.e., difficulties in housing and employment) are common amongst the general formerly incarcerated population, scholarship has emphasized that Indigenous women's experiences nonetheless are rooted in the settler state's eliminatory relationship with Indigenous peoples.

Yet, less attention has been paid to the impact of individual factors in reintegration, notably identity. Although limited in scope, criminological literature has explored formerly incarcerated individuals' identity in a structural, rather than cultural sense. In doing so, the scholarship argues that prison is an active social agent that structures the environment in which individuals understand and embody their personhood. This includes having authority over where individuals can restart their lives, whom they can contact, and which spaces they can interact in. This power is particularly relevant for Indigenous women due to the historical and continued state efforts to control their existence in settler society. In this line of thinking, scholarship argues that Indigenous women are frequently confined to a state-created identity that reinforces settler power and Indigenous erasure. From this perspective, reintegration is viewed as a contemporary but insidious form of state governance over Indigenous women's identity.

While important, this direction in the scholarship excludes the ongoing resilience Indigenous women exhibit as they explore their identity in their communities. This nuance is imperative to recognize, as Indigenous women have always resisted settler domination and control, including within carceral spaces. Through relationship building, reciprocal love and care, and acts of refusal, Indigenous women have actively shifted the seemingly predictable space of reintegration into one that reflects cultural revitalization and resurgence. Therefore, this side of the scholarship contends that women, through the support of kinship networks, *can* and *do* practice their cultural identities in post-carceral life. In this way, reintegration is equally understood as a space for Indigenous women to confront settler colonial harms and (re)connect with their cultural sense of self.

### *Research Question*

Based on these seemingly dichotomous perspectives, reintegration represents a site of ongoing tension whereby Indigenous women must navigate the push and pull between their carceral-based identities and a return to culturally relevant identities. Nevertheless, structural conceptualizations of reintegration continue to dominate the scholarship, thereby omitting the relational experience of identity transformation—informed by kinship relationships—amongst Indigenous women. As a result, there is a need to explore how formerly incarcerated Indigenous women make sense of, shift, and subsequently experience their personhood in the contentious space of post-carceral life. In light of this research gap, this thesis asks: How does identity transformation unfold, and how is it experienced, by formerly incarcerated Indigenous women during their reintegration? Based on the data I collected, I argue that identity transformation is a subtle process that takes place mainly through the formation and reproduction of relationships Indigenous women cultivate with others. These relationships are central to their identity

transformation, as they provide women with the ongoing guidance to shift their identity from carceral subjects towards an identity that aligns with Indigenous understandings of being. This occurs through providing cultural knowledge that demonstrates that women's identities are not tied to the state. In turn, this leads to healing from settler colonial harms, stronger connections to culture and community, and encouragement for women to recognize their agency in turning inwards and returning to their cultural sense of self. In this way, relationships are foundational to Indigenous women's identity transformation, as the love and care they embody help women understand, imagine and practice what it means to be an Indigenous woman.

### *Clarifying My Project*

By examining the 'messiness' of reintegration in the context of identity transformation, this project demonstrates that post-carceral life is not a streamlined process but an ongoing antagonism that Indigenous women must explore, experience, and navigate. To understand this tension, this thesis unpacks the contentious nature of settler colonialism. Central to settler colonialism is the logic of elimination, wherein settlers seek to eradicate Indigenous presence to prevent any threats to their structural invasion (Wolfe, 2006). Through this objective, the settler state actively engages in various strategies to remove the autonomy of Indigenous peoples to create a 'new' society that upholds settler lifestyles, values and institutions. However, Indigenous peoples have consistently pushed back against attempts of elimination by the settler state. Indigenous peoples have challenged their elimination through acts of resistance, but also through ongoing processes of resurgence, in which Indigenous peoples regenerate modes of governance, traditions and cultural practices that reaffirm their presence, independent of settler society. Therefore, while settler colonialism is founded on an attempt to control and subsequently

eliminate Indigenous peoples, Indigenous peoples exhibit an enduring Indigeneity and are consistently resisting this domination to make space for expressions of self-determination.

This thesis ultimately provides insight into how this antagonistic understanding of settler colonialism unfolds in the context of Indigenous women's experience with reintegration. Reintegration is a useful space to unpack this tension, as it simultaneously demonstrates ongoing expressions of settler control *and* Indigenous resistance. While most of the mainstream critical scholarship frames reintegration as an inherently harsh space that confines the agency of Indigenous women, I argue that Indigenous women have always resisted carceral attempts of domination in ways that reaffirm their sovereignty in settler society. Hence, this thesis challenges the labelling of reintegration as a deterministic settler colonial space by emphasizing the ongoing negotiation and resistance Indigenous women exhibit in this space. Through this approach, I contribute to ongoing calls in the academy to prioritize discussions of resurgence and decolonization when examining the carceral state and its impact on Indigenous peoples. Overall, this thesis examines the identity transformation process of formerly incarcerated Indigenous women to offer a more nuanced understanding of their reintegration experience.

### *Overview of Thesis Structure*

In the first chapter of this thesis, I provide a literature review of key scholarly conversations that contextualize Indigenous women's experiences with their identity inside *and* outside the correctional system. Through this focus, I discuss understandings of Indigenous female identity, the history of Indigenous female incarceration, community reunification outcomes for Indigenous women, and the intersection of resurgence, decolonization and (re)learning of Indigenous identity. The second chapter outlines the theoretical framework that guided this thesis. I introduce settler colonial theory and resurgence as the main theories used to

theorize reintegration as a contested site for Indigenous women's identity transformation process. The third chapter summarizes the qualitative methodology and research methods adopted in this thesis. In this chapter, I discuss the research intentions and decolonial methodologies that informed my approach to the data.

The fourth chapter includes an overview of the findings from the data. This chapter is organized into two central sections. First, I present data that reaffirms reintegration as a site of ongoing settler colonial control, whereby carceral geography influences the ability of Indigenous women to (re)connect with their cultural personhood. Second, I present data that showcases the relationships and subsequent resurgence that unfold in reintegration, which encourages Indigenous women to adopt a culturally based identity. In chapter five, I discuss how Indigenous women experience identity transformation during reintegration. I argue that while expressions of settler colonialism play a strong role in shaping women's identity post-carceral life, it is the love and care embedded in kinship networks that are more influential in supporting Indigenous women's identity transformation from carceral subjects toward culturally relevant identities. Through this discussion, I highlight that reintegration is not a deterministic space as commonly described, but a nexus of tension where women must navigate attempts at settler control alongside opportunities for kinship-based resurgence.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The release and reintegration stage is a complex, shifting, and intersectional experience for formerly incarcerated Indigenous women. Upon release from carceral institutions, Indigenous women often experience systemic barriers such as housing insecurity, loss of child custody, financial hardship, and poor health with greater severity than other formerly incarcerated populations. In the literature, reintegration tends to be framed as either a ‘positive’ or ‘negative’ process (Brottveit & Fransson, 2024; Doherty et al., 2014; Sells et al., 2020; Wainwright & Muñoz, 2025). I argue, on the other hand, that release should be understood in less dichotomic terms and instead as a complex, evolving experience that takes place after a period of carceral exclusion. Stated differently, it is a multidimensional process that provides an array of opportunities and challenges for Indigenous women who are navigating their re-entry into society after incarceration.

A central element of Indigenous women’s re-entry is identity, as reintegration often means reconnecting with culture, community, and healing more generally. From an Indigenous perspective, identity formation is informed by kinship relationships, which can shape Indigenous women’s understandings of being. However, the ability to reshape one’s identity is also profoundly informed by carceral institutions like the prison system. Therefore, this chapter investigates the social structures, dynamics, and relationships embedded *within* and *outside* the prison system that shape the identity of formerly incarcerated Indigenous women. This includes exploring the role of Canadian law and regulations, institutional policies, and diverse kinship networks, which collectively inform Indigenous female identity. In doing so, I highlight limitations in the existing literature to demonstrate how my thesis contributes to filling in existing research gaps.

Building on this foundation, this literature review shows how community reunification is a complex, interpersonal, and ongoing process. Notably, it reveals that this post-carceral experience is inherently relational, in the sense that kinship relationships inform the experiences of formerly incarcerated Indigenous women. Exploring identity transformation after carceral release, I engage with literature that examines how identity is produced, negotiated, and expressed by formerly incarcerated Indigenous women through relational ties. In other words, this chapter is grounded within an appreciation for the significance of kinship, or more accurately, the role kinship has within most Indigenous worldviews and understandings of self. Framing Indigenous women's experiences in this sort of relational context prioritizes Indigenous ontologies and experiences and shifts the conversation away from more one-dimensional discourses that tend to focus on settler colonial surveillance practices, oppression, and carceral geographies.

Overall, this literature review outlines the current conversations in the existing literature on Indigenous women's experiences during the community reunification process. This chapter begins with an overview of Indigenous identity, where I show the conflicting cultural, political, and legal understandings of Indigenous identity that inherently shape the experiences of Indigenous women in Canada. Next, I highlight the historical context of Indigenous women's incarceration in the Canadian carceral state. Then, I review the existing literature on formerly incarcerated Indigenous women's experiences when it comes to the release and community reunification process. Finally, I discuss Indigenous resurgence and decolonization in the context of (re)learning about Indigenous identity. Through these discussions, including the final discussion on identity and resurgence, I will demonstrate that the existing literature on the reunification process has important gaps—gaps that I believe can be addressed by my thesis.

## **Indigenous Identity**

Indigenous identity is an inherently relational and dynamic concept that is informed by history, political relations, kinship, spirituality, land, and, more lately, the ongoing impacts of settler colonialism. Despite popular beliefs that Indigenous peoples are a homogenous population with universal experiences, languages, and cultures (Monchalin, 2016), Indigenous peoples have distinct experiences, beliefs, and ways of living. This is clear concerning identity, as Indigenous communities incorporate multilayered but definite understandings of being Indigenous. While there is no set definition of Indigenous identity (Weaver, 2001), Indigenous communities tend to be guided by overarching values of what it means to be from that specific Indigenous nation or community. Indigenous identity is not static, but rather, is usually guided by an overarching set of egalitarian and collective ideals of being. In this way, Indigenous identity can be conceptualized as a constantly evolving state of becoming in the social world. Therefore, contrary to Western views of identity, many Indigenous communities carry the worldview that identity is not concerned with establishing a stable sense of self, but instead centers on understanding one's role and responsibility in relation to everything in the world (Quinn, 2020).

### *Foundations of Indigenous Identity*

Central to Indigenous identity are various cultural foundations such as kinship, creation stories, and economic-land-based practices. More recently, settler colonial juridical formations, including settler law and policy, have also started to inform Indigenous identity (Ineese-Nash, 2020). However, it is kinship relationships and networks that have productive power in ensuring the reproduction of Indigenous identity from generation to generation. Kinship is best understood as a process of connection and, therefore, an expression of relationality that emphasizes responsibility and reciprocity toward human and non-human kin (Powell & Curley, 2008). Notably, kinship systems do not merely describe the familial or community ties among

Indigenous communities, but also embody cultural ways of being, knowing, and practicing Indigeneity (Dudgeon & Bray, 2019). Despite settler colonial attempts at assimilation and erasure, such as the Indian Residential School System and the Indian Act, which sought to eliminate Indigenous identity, kinship relationships have remained strong in numerous Indigenous communities. Indeed, they are often an important resource for Indigenous individuals who want to (re)learn what it means to be Indigenous (Innes, 2013). This is attributed to the role of Elders, parents, friends, and community members who teach a multitude of generations the cultural values of respect, love, and ingenuity that are integral to many Indigenous understandings of self and community (Restoule, 2021). In doing so, Indigenous kinship networks often act as agents of socialization as they relationally transmit the responsibilities and behaviours expected of being Indigenous (Innes, 2013). This is achieved through storytelling, ceremonies such as community circles, and role-modelling, which collectively introduce, teach, and support guiding pillars of Indigenous livelihood (Yamanouchi, 2010). As a result, relationships play a pivotal role in shaping and enforcing the values and ideals many Indigenous people strive to incorporate within their daily lives. Ultimately, kinship is foundational to the creation and preservation of identity, as it reminds individuals who they are and should continue to be during their lifetime. Overall, identity across most Indigenous societies is entrenched and reproduced within enduring kinship networks, which reinforce reciprocal obligations to a way of life and a sense of being (Cajete & Little Bear, 2000).

### *Spirituality*

Indigenous identity is also formulated through spirituality, specifically Indigenous peoples' understanding of their ancestors' origins. To illustrate, the story of Sky Woman and her journey to Earth remains a cornerstone of identity within Haudenosaunee societies (Watts, 2013).

While stories of Sky Woman center on her creation of Earth through song, ceremonies, and work alongside numerous animals on the back of a giant turtle (Simpson, 2011), they implicitly serve as techniques for maintaining one's Indigenous identity. Particularly, her intentionality to ensure a balanced relationship between land, humans, and non-humans reiterates the sense of self that Haudenosaunee communities strive to adopt. This includes respecting mutual relationships between humans and non-humans (i.e., animals or ecosystems/land), prioritizing equality, cooperation, and harmony within society and social structures, and recognizing women's empowerment as sources of knowledge, creators, and their ability to provide life to future Indigenous generations (Mitchell, 2023). Collectively, these pillars, rooted in stories of spiritual creation, are critical to Haudenosaunee identity. In this way, and more generally, spirituality is core to Indigenous identity, as relationality with the plant, animal, and human spiritual worlds reminds Indigenous individuals who they are meant to be in the social world (Quinn, 2020).

### *Connection to Land*

In addition to kinship and spirituality, connection to land is central to most Indigenous societies and understandings of self. To expand, land gives Indigenous communities the crucial freedom to engage with and actualize the philosophies that underlie an Indigenous sense of being (Simpson, 2011). Stated differently, land is a spatial relation whereby Indigenous peoples can recall, reclaim, and revise their identity (Yerxa, 2014). This influence arises from the understanding that a relationship with land has established the historical roles, responsibilities, and rules Indigenous people must honour and live by (Yerxa, 2014). Hence, land is integral to maintaining Indigenous identity, as it reinforces the key actions and cultural knowledge that are linked to maintaining Indigeneity. Put differently, connections to land can reinforce that Indigenous identity is not based on a rigid sense of self, but rather reflects a combination of what

one does, knows, and becomes in their lifetime. To demonstrate, an ongoing relationship with water, non-human species, and land reminds Indigenous peoples that existence in isolation is not a feasible way of being. Ultimately, this link encourages Indigenous individuals to incorporate loving and cooperative relationships to sustain the idea that Indigenous identity is highly relational. In doing so, connection to creation pushes Indigenous individuals to recognize that their state of being is cultivated through harmonious, respectful, and loving relationships with others (Yerxa, 2014). Overall, attachment to land can provide the opportunity for Indigenous individuals to deepen their sense of social and political belonging. Specifically, land provides a safe space where Indigenous peoples can cultivate cultural knowledge, apply the principles of Indigeneity, and formulate meaningful relationships that support their state of being (Ward et al., 2021).

### *Indigenous Female Identity*

When contextualizing Indigenous identity, it is imperative to recognize its intersectional nature in relation to gender. Historically, Indigenous identity was not predicated on Western notions of gender differences between men and women. In this way, ideals that informed the foundation of Indigenous identity were equalitarian among men and women in their communities. However, upon the emergence of settler colonial interventions, such as the introduction of patriarchy in Indigenous societies, Indigenous women's identity became redefined to fit a distinct and limited set of Western expectations (Anderson, 2016). To clarify, prior to colonialism and settler colonialism, Indigenous women held significant political, economic, and social power in most, if not all, Indigenous societies. As Indigenous identity centers on one's role and state of being in the social world, this multidimensional power enabled Indigenous women to cultivate identities as qualified leaders, knowledge providers, and spiritual

mediators. Kinship networks reinforced this identity by respecting and upholding Indigenous women's influential roles.

While the division of labour existed in Indigenous societies, women's work, such as early childcare, food harvesting, agriculture, and housing, was not devalued in comparison to men's labour (J. K. Brown, 1992). Although not all Indigenous societies featured female land ownership, Indigenous women in certain communities held ownership of property, and were responsible for overseeing property disputes within their communities (Klein, 1995). Additionally, due to a high degree of respect and community valuation of women's labour, Indigenous women often held authority over food (Anderson, 2016). This power was critical, as women were deemed responsible and thus trusted to produce or distribute food to maintain the survival of their community and nation. Collectively, Indigenous women encompassed a considerable degree of economic authority in select societies. In addition to economic authority, Indigenous women also held significant oversight of political systems in numerous Indigenous societies. Stemming from a worldview that all members of society deserve equal input within a nation, many Indigenous societies strongly encouraged Indigenous women's political power. This was manifested through their positions as leaders, their participation in political delegations and councils, as well as their representation in diplomatic envoys (Awiakta, 1993). Ultimately, Indigenous women's direct political participation reaffirmed their identity as leaders qualified to make influential decisions regarding families, their community, and the nation's well-being.

Indigenous women also exercised spiritual power within their communities. Many Indigenous creation stories include strong female characters, where women are often characterized as giving life to humans as they held the power of the Creator (Allen, 1986). This spiritual relationship with creation resulted in the cultural ideal that women were to be

knowledge keepers in the social world, as they possessed traditional Indigenous wisdom (Sydora et al., 2023). For instance, due to their strong understanding of spirituality, Indigenous women were given the role of medicine people, which translated into positions as teachers, leaders, or doctors in their communities (Anderson, 2016). Women were also heavily incorporated in supporting or sponsoring spiritual ceremonies when they did not occupy the working sphere. Altogether, the spiritual power of Indigenous women stemmed from the communal recognition that they served as intermediaries between life on Earth and the spirit world. Overall, Indigenous women's powerful state of being, and therefore, their identity, is inherently relational as it is shaped by shared values and communal experiences that are upheld by kinship networks.

#### *Canadian Law, Policy and Indigenous Female Identity*

Despite the fact that Indigenous communities have had and continue to have distinct and culturally relevant understandings of womanhood, Indigenous female identity has been undermined, disrupted, and re-codified through Canadian law and policy. With the emergence of settler colonialism in Canada, Indigeneity and Indigenous womanhood became redefined to fulfill the systematic goals of the colonizer (Alfred & Corntassel, 2005). These goals centered on the permanent erasure of Indigenous culture, forced assimilation of Indigenous peoples, and the maintenance of European society (Fontaine, 2016). Consequently, understandings of what constituted Indigenous identity were recreated to allow the state to pursue their objective of eliminating Indigeneity from Canada. This settler-colonial goal was primarily achieved under the Indian Act, whereby First Nations identity was constricted to the legal category of 'status Indian' (Lawrence, 2003). In doing so, the Canadian state restricted Indigeneity to individuals who could demonstrate their relation (via a male line) to those with established status (Fiske, 2006). Therefore, First Nations peoples who could not determine this relationality were often labelled as

non-status or unregistered Indians, as well as ‘Métis’. Besides the Métis, the Inuit were also not included under the Indian Act, thereby contributing to the further classification, stratification, and regulation of Indigenous identity (Lawrence, 2003). This legal emphasis on defining and regulating Indigeneity precluded thousands of Indigenous peoples from being considered ‘Indian’, ultimately preventing their ability to live on reserves, receive federally funded services or programs, and meet criteria for individual-based benefits (Lavoie & Forget, 2011).

Consequently, Indigenous communities faced erasure due to the rigid and paternalistic control of the state that worked to abolish the apparent ‘Indian problem’ in the country. While the Indian Act has been reformed to allow First Nations communities to establish more independent membership rules, state benefits such as federally funded on-reserve housing and educational support continue to rely on legal definitions of Indian status originating from the Indian Act (Anaya, 2015). In doing so, the Canadian government has conflated Indigenous identity with Indian status, thereby shifting identity from a state of being to one that is determined by a political designation. Ultimately, Indigenous identity, as determined by the state, has been codified into law as a settler mechanism that regulates Indigeneity (Coté, 2001).

#### *Gendered Provisions in the Indian Act*

Although this settler-led project of identity reconstruction largely impacted First Nations peoples, Indigenous women experienced a deliberate attack to their identity by the state. This occurred through state systems such as the Indian Act and the Residential School System, which played a decisive role in reconstructing Indigenous women’s identity. To expand, the Indian Act perpetuated gender discrimination against Indigenous women through a reliance on the male transmission of status (Palmater, 2014). With a male-parent rule that guaranteed Indian status, Indigenous women had no or limited ability to provide status to their children and future

descendants (Day, 2018). Additionally, Indigenous women who married non-Indigenous men were stripped of their status, with their children also unable to retain status until this issue was addressed in 1985 through Bill C-31 (Palmater, 2014). This settler patriarchal governance over identity had immense impacts on Indigenous women's identity. Limited agency over status created feelings of isolation and disrupted understandings of self among Indigenous women (Balfour, 2008). Loss of status through the Indian Act also resulted in restricted access to reserve land, community, and kinship networks, which collectively limited opportunities to exercise culturally relevant notions of womanhood (Balfour, 2008).

Without status, Indigenous women frequently experienced displacement and disconnection from their communities and wider land base, thereby contributing to disrupted social connections and cultural ties (Barker, 2008). Consequently, this systemic exclusion limited Indigenous women's ability to engage in political, economic, and spiritual decision-making within their cultural and community lives. The embedded gender discrimination within the Indian Act contributed to the idea that Indigenous women's identity was inferior, which tends to be reflected in the significant lack of political power they once held in their communities (Palmater, 2014). This can be attributed to the blurring of legal Indian status with identity and belonging, which contradicted many traditional beliefs about the significance of Indigenous women. While gender discrimination within the Indian Act was removed in 1985 under Bill C-31, its long-lasting impact on Indigenous female identity remains embedded in Canadian society, including within many Indigenous communities (Lawrence, 2003).

The undermining of Indigenous women's identity as authoritative leaders and valued holders of knowledge was further enshrined through the Indian Residential School System and its intergenerational impacts. This was achieved through the intentional targeting of both adult

Indigenous women and Indigenous female youth. The forcible removal of children from their parents' care and into residential schools reinforced the notion that Indigenous women were irresponsible, unfit, and uncivilized beings (Rule, 2018). This was attributed to the state-led characterization of Indigenous women as incompetent parents due to their emphasis on teaching supposed 'savage' and 'brutal' behaviour to their children (Fontaine, 2016). Consequently, this state-designated status of Indigenous women transformed their identity into that of subordinate individuals who needed settler colonial control both in their communities and broader Canadian society (McKinney, 2022). Indigenous female identity, therefore, was reduced to a low status within the Canadian social hierarchy that could only be reformed by settler interventions, surveillance, and social engineering. The elimination of Indigenous worldviews that supported and informed female identity was also attacked within residential schools. Specifically, entry into residential schools censored historical understandings of Indigenous womanhood and, thus, identity. Indigenous girls were pressured to assimilate and adopt Eurocentric notions of female identity, thereby eradicating their opportunities to learn and adopt their distinct cultural identity (Harde, 2017). Collectively, the Indian Residential School System resulted in an intergenerational cycle that stripped Indigenous women of the power they once held.

#### *The Logic of Elimination and the Indian Act*

The loss of Indian status and, therefore, belonging through gendered provisions within the Indian Act was a means to try to legally and politically get rid of the 'Indian problem' and Indigeneity altogether in Canada. Specifically, the Indian Act played a central role in the enfranchisement and logic of elimination enacted against First Nations communities. Upon its establishment, the Indian Act held the assumption that First Nations peoples would prefer to relinquish their Indian status in exchange for inclusion within Canadian society (Kirkby, 2019).

In this way, the Act served as an assimilatory apparatus that sought to disconnect First Nations peoples from their communities and encourage their adoption of settler lifestyles (Kirkby, 2019). To achieve this goal, enfranchisement – the loss of Indian status and subsequent acquisition of Canadian citizenship rights and privileges – became a key feature of the Indian Act (Hall, 2018). However, the assimilatory objective of enfranchisement within the Indian Act quickly eroded into an eliminatory practice, disproportionately targeting Indigenous women. In doing so, the Indian Act became a tool that worked to dispossess, disconnect, and erase First Nations communities from Canada via attacks on Indigenous womanhood.

This eliminatory logic was achieved through gendered provisions that rendered Indigenous female identity as a political and legal designation that could be reimagined or eradicated in the interests of settler expansion and power. This intent was most reflective in sexist clauses in the Indian Act, such as ‘marrying out’ and its aftermath - ‘the double mother rule’, which deliberately dispossessed First Nations women to facilitate their displacement from their communities (Stevenson, 2021). These provisions that targeted First Nations women can be described as compulsory enfranchisement, whereby women were involuntarily forced to relinquish their Indian status (Palmater, 2014). Consequently, First Nations women often lost, without their consent, the ability to provide status for their future descendants; the right to live on reserve lands; access to band membership; and the opportunity to use band resources (Kelm & Smith, 2018). These losses frequently forced women to abandon their cultural identities and assimilate into settler lifestyles, due to their relocation to urban spaces, disrupted community connections, and/or the erosion of their power in communal governance (Parkkila, 2021). Through severing First Nations women’s land, cultural, and kinship ties, the Indian Act sought to extinguish Indigenous practices and traditions in order to force women to assimilate into settler

culture (Herr, 2021). In this way, the compulsory enfranchisement of First Nations women in the Indian Act was a paternalistic attempt to eradicate Indigenous identity and future presence in settler society. Therefore, Canadian law and policy not only regulated Indigenous female identity but also actively supported the settler state's long-term objective to eliminate Indigenous people as distinct political peoples from the fabric of Canadian society.

Historically, Indigenous women held diverse economic, political and social roles in their communities. From holding property rights and leading spiritual ceremonies, to being respected as qualified leaders, Indigenous women's identity centred on their inherent power and agency. Foundational to this identity was the impact of Indigenous women's kinship roles and responsibilities, which reaffirmed and sustained their multidimensional, autonomous roles. However, this historical understanding of Indigenous women's identity is overlaid by, and in tension with, settler colonialism. With the arrival of settler colonialism in Canada, Indigenous women's identity was reconstructed to emphasize their disposability within their communities and broader Canadian society (Bhandar, 2016). This redefining of identity was crucial, since diminishing the political, economic, and social power previously tied to Indigenous women's identities was critical for the dispossession and exploitation of Indigenous lands, as well as the legal erosion of Indigenous populations. Particularly, the confinement of Indigenous women to a submissive and demoted status allowed settler colonialists to have greater and unrestricted access to the varying socio-political institutions and spaces previously led by women (Anderson, 2016). Reducing the agency once associated with Indigenous women's identity served as a key pathway for attaining control over Indigenous communities, culture, and presence within Canada. The historical and legal formation of Indigenous women's identity is key to understanding their experiences in Canada, including within its carceral system.

## **Historical Context of Indigenous Women's Incarceration**

Despite comprising of 4% of the Canadian female population, Indigenous women represent over 50% of federally incarcerated women (Statistics Canada, 2026). While Indigenous female incarceration is characterized as a contemporary social problem, Indigenous women have historically been and continue to be overrepresented in prisons due to systematic carceral oppression and legacies of colonialism. Ultimately, this has led to Indigenous women having distinct carceral experiences, including both their entry into, and exit from prisons. Scholars often define Indigenous women's pathways into prison as a victimization-criminalization continuum. This perspective highlights that as an Indigenous woman's victimization increases, they are more likely to use criminal behaviour as a coping or survival strategy to address their victimization. However, it is crucial to note that criminality can often be the only available option for Indigenous women due to the significant failure of government resources and social services to provide support to victims of gendered violence (Kaiser-Derrick, 2019). The victimization-criminalization perspective is best reflected in the fact that incarcerated Indigenous women are more likely to be victims of sexual or physical abuse, have personal or familial trauma from residential schools, endure histories of substance abuse or alcoholism, and have experiences with homelessness or involuntary placement in the foster care system (McGuire & Murdoch, 2022). In this way, Indigenous women's entry into prison is reflective of varying historical, social, economic, and political experiences that inform their autonomy, agency, and life experiences. These lived experiences increase the likelihood of Indigenous women experiencing endangerment or victimization, which can then translate into a higher risk of criminal involvement (Balfour, 2008).

### *Settler Colonialism, Gendered Violence and Carceral Control*

Although higher rates of Indigenous female imprisonment are often linked to perceptions of their increased engagement in crime, Indigenous women have nonetheless been historically targeted by Canada's carceral systems. This targeting derives from stereotypical assumptions of the values, motives, and behaviours of incarcerated Indigenous women. While incarcerated women are generally considered to be misbehaved and unfeminine due to their violation of rigid femininity norms that construct women as compliant, passive, and non-violent (Dell et al., 2009; Martel, 2001), Indigeneity adds a critical layer to the characterizations of these gender violations. For instance, Indigenous women are oftentimes pathologized as innately violent, angry, and mentally unstable (McGuire & Murdoch, 2022). This distinct labelling originates from Indigenous women rejecting imposed colonial gender binaries that confine women to a submissive way of being (Struthers, Montford & Hannah-Moffat, 2021). Consequently, Indigenous women are stereotyped as combative, dangerous, and evil due to their perceived inability to adopt Western notions of womanhood. As a result, incarcerated Indigenous women's identity is constructed as a specific violation and ultimate threat to white, upper-class, and hegemonic norms of femininity (George et al., 2020). This association of Indigenous womanhood creates and justifies their (mis)treatment in carceral spaces, as these acts are redefined as a form of societal protection (McGill, 2008).

Attaching specific labels and, therefore, identities to incarcerated Indigenous women as being dangerous, immoral, and vicious is rooted in the continued settler colonial attempt to undermine Indigenous women's power. While the power of female prisoners is generally suppressed in carceral spaces to ensure the continuation of patriarchal control (Dell et al., 2009), Indigenous women's carceral treatment is also rooted in settler colonial control. That is, the

destruction and removal of Indigenous peoples are integral to settler colonialism's goal of 'conquering' and acquiring Indigenous land through gendered state violence (Morgensen, 2012). Since Indigenous women challenge the social, economic, and political legitimacy of white settler states through their embodied sovereignty, colonial acts of carceral control, such as imprisonment, have been used to undermine their power (Bird, 2021).

The decontextualized narrative of Indigenous women as threats to hegemonic, white, and upper-class norms of womanhood provides an ongoing opportunity for the state to enact settler domination over Indigenous women under the guise of 'meaningful' rehabilitation. As a result, the deliberate targeting of Indigenous women via incarceration has become a settler colonial tactic to dispossess, contain, and ultimately eliminate Indigenous women's cultural power (Marques & Monchalin, 2020). The penitentiary represents a contemporary expression of settler colonialism, whereby settler goals of undermining Indigenous women's identity and power are achieved within the correctional system (Chartrand, 2019). Therefore, carceral practices, such as punitive sentencing, harsh mistreatment, and limited programming, serve as mechanisms to diminish the agency of Indigenous women, which ultimately reduces their resistance to settler domination. Overall, the mass incarceration of Indigenous women in Canada is a state tool that attempts to facilitate the control, assimilation, and eventual extermination of Indigenous women's autonomy (George et al., 2020).

### *The Incarcerated Indigenous Female Experience*

Once incarcerated, Indigenous women experience a plethora of punitive treatment that is rooted in systemic discrimination. This discrimination stems from legacies of colonialism that have perpetuated racist stereotypes regarding the morality of Indigenous women. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Indigenous women were essentialized as 'wild women' whose

behaviour was considered unfeminine, abnormal, and threatening to Canadian society (Bosworth & Carrabine, 2001). This settler-led moral panic resulted in the view that Indigenous women were degraded individuals in need of discipline. The punitive and inequitable use of incarceration became a favoured method of punishment aimed at correcting Indigenous women's behaviour (Chesney-Lind, 1991). This mindset has persisted in contemporary Canadian society, as Indigenous women endure disproportionately harsh conditions of imprisonment as a response to their criminal behaviour. For instance, Indigenous women are more likely to be classified as a higher security risk, thereby increasing their representation in maximum-security prison institutions (Webster & Doob, 2004). Additionally, Indigenous women have a higher rate of victimization from excessive use of force by correctional staff (Montford & Moore, 2018). The over-reliance on segregation units for excessive periods is a further punitive measure experienced by Indigenous women (Prevost & Kilty, 2020). Indigenous women are also far less likely to obtain parole than non-Indigenous populations (McGuire & Murdoch, 2022). Notably, Indigenous women often experience institutional sexual violence through strip searches, sexual assaults, and cavity searches (Hutchison, 2019). Ultimately, these conditions of confinement reflect the larger culture of prisons that are informed by racist, sexist, and colonial tropes of Indigenous women.

Of significant concern is Indigenous women's lack of access to culturally and gender-specific programming during their incarceration. As Kaiser-Derrick (2019) argues, correctional programming continues to operate from a Western perspective that omits incarcerated Indigenous women's cultural, health, and emotional needs. While the Correctional Service of Canada is required to incorporate Indigenous women's cultural histories in case management decisions and, therefore, their programming, there have been repeated institutional failures to do so (McGuire &

Murdoch, 2022). This neglect of Indigenous female-centered programming is significant given that pedagogical choices in program delivery are more likely to shape how women understand and experience kinship. Although programming itself does not directly teach Indigenous women about the significance of kinship, the practice of teaching, sharing, and connecting allows incarcerated Indigenous women to infer the value of kinship relationships. For instance, through program group work, women frequently form authentic connections with others, understand the benefits of community in terms of healing, and foster a strong sense of cultural belonging that would otherwise be absent in carceral environments (Pulis et al., 2021). This is significant as studies have found that the learning of kinship in carceral programming often leads to engagement with cultural practices and traditions that encourage pride, self-expression, and eventual acceptance of Indigenous female identity (Tetrault, 2022).

Despite the scholarly recognition of the benefits of Indigenous female-centered programming, there remain key shortcomings in its application in Canadian prisons. This limitation derives from CSC's reliance on a hegemonic view of Indigeneity, which has perpetuated a homogenous, oversimplified, and overgeneralized view of Indigenous identity (Wellman, 2024). Consequently, correctional programming initiatives fail to recognize the diverse realities of Indigenous womanhood, as they resort to traditionalist and, ultimately, stereotypical understandings of Indigeneity (Martel & Brassard, 2006). Indigenous women are often limited to either conforming to an institutionalized Indigenous female identity, disavowing any form of Indigenous self-identification, or strategically embracing a stereotypical Indigenous female identity as a form of carceral survival (Martel & Brassard, 2006). Taken together, these shortcomings are severely consequential as they prevent making space for authentic and culturally relevant Indigenous female identities upon release (Van Der Meulen et al., 2018).

*‘Despite the pain’: Positive Experiences with Incarceration*

Despite Indigenous women often experiencing adverse carceral experiences, it is important to recognize the more positive experiences that can manifest during incarceration. This is evident in the relationships Indigenous women have formed with each other inside prisons as forms of mutual aid and support. The emergence of kinship relationships inside prisons arises from Indigenous women’s lack of trust with prison staff who are seen as uncooperative, punitive, and enforcers of carceral domination (Hannah-Moffat, 2000a). In addition, Indigenous women frequently experience isolation and emotional distress during incarceration, highlighting the common need for a support system in prison (McIntosh, 2021). In light of these carceral difficulties, peer-to-peer, or prisoner-to-prisoner, relationships have become a significant mechanism that provides resources, skill-building, healing, and most importantly, solidarity among Indigenous women. At the broader level, peer-to-peer support networks that emerge in prison have been found to improve mental health outcomes, promote educational attainment, and provide general day-to-day support (Bagnall et al., 2015). For Indigenous women, these relationships play a more culturally informed role. Specifically, relationships help women uncover their culture, push back against the settler-imposed shame associated with Indigenous identity, and engage in emotional and spiritual healing (Yuen & Pedlar, 2009). While there remains a limited amount of research on relationship building inside prison, this practice nonetheless plays a role in promoting culturally relevant understandings of Indigenous female identity.

Relationships not only provide a cultural benefit for incarcerated Indigenous women but also serve as a political tool. As Hannah-Moffat (2000b) argues, the criminal justice system is purposefully structured to prevent women from mobilizing, trusting each other and creating

strong bonds. This design stems from the correctional system's desire to maintain a punishment and disciplinary based culture, whereby incarcerated individuals experience fear and insecurity to prevent their disobedience to authority (Bloom & Bradshaw, 2022). Despite structural attempts to hinder solidarity, Indigenous women have cultivated carceral kinship relationships to challenge the stratified culture in prison. For example, through networks such as the Native Sisterhood, Indigenous women have collectively organized to challenge the colonial legacy of incarceration by defending their cultural rights, engaging in a shared reconciliation of female identity, and advocating for the recognition of traditions that sustain Indigeneity (Adema, 2012). In this way, relationship building behind prison walls can be thought of as an act of resistance, whereby collective performances of the self encourage Indigenous women to confront inequitable experiences and hierarchies inside the prison (Bosworth & Carrabine, 2001).

Overall, Indigenous women's experiences with incarceration reveal the complex nature of this carceral stage. As a form of contemporary settler control, Indigenous female incarceration is rooted in attempts to eliminate Indigenous women's power and identity. Consequently, Indigenous women's carceral experiences are often marked by inequality, oppression, and domination. This is reflected in their encounters with physical assault, sexual violence, inaccurate risk classification and lack of culturally relevant programming. Yet, the pains of incarceration can also lead to more positive experiences, particularly through relationship building and its cultural and political significance. Indeed, kinship inside carceral institutions can arguably encourage Indigenous women to reconnect with their identity, engage in healing, and assert agency in light of oppressive structures and policies.

## **Indigenous Women's Experiences with Reintegration**

Whereas the historical context of Indigenous women's incarceration illustrates settler colonial attacks to their identity, a focus on reintegration is essential to understanding how Indigenous women navigate and reclaim their cultural identity after prison contact. Carceral release and reintegration are often characterized as the pivotal stages whereby the revolving door to incarceration either remains open or is successfully closed. This stage occurs when newly released individuals transition back into their community following a period of social separation (i.e., incarceration). For Indigenous women, their intersectional identities, including the establishment of kinship relationships, actively shape their outcomes with reintegration. That is, while men and women generally experience similar obstacles during the reintegration process, race and gender can have an influential impact on how these barriers are experienced (Opsal & Foley, 2013). For racialized women, especially Indigenous women, this transition is far more complex, as they often face a triple jeopardy of racism, sexism, and poverty during their community reunification (Terry, 2016). Consequently, this has created an alternative reality for Indigenous women to experience and, therefore, navigate upon carceral release.

### *Intersectionality*

The unique challenges Indigenous women experience during community reunification can be understood through the lens of intersectionality. Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), intersectionality demonstrates that the dimensions of racism and sexism collectively shape the oppression, privilege, and social outcomes of multiple social groups (Al-Faham et al., 2019). For formerly incarcerated Indigenous women, intersectionality helps to contextualize the unique experiences they face when being released back into the community. Indigenous women who are reconnecting with their community frequently experience the ongoing impacts of gender discrimination and settler colonialism. Specifically, settler colonial processes, institutionalized

discrimination, and racism collectively shape the social, political, and economic contexts of Indigenous women's re-entry, thereby exacerbating their structural victimization upon release (Grekul & Robinson, 2025). As a result, generalized barriers amongst the formerly incarcerated female population have become more pronounced for Indigenous women. Indigenous women, for example, are more likely to have challenges with attaining housing, engaging in family reunification, preventing substance or alcohol abuse, and obtaining employment opportunities post-release from prison (Sheehan & Trotter, 2018). These barriers are reflective of the limited structural support, programming, and resources provided by the carceral state to ensure Indigenous women experience positive or beneficial community reunification (Baldry, 2013).

While CSC argues that it facilitates successful community reunification outcomes for Indigenous women, institutional failures concerning programming and release planning reinforce the prison system's limitations. Specifically, an intersectional lens on the carceral state reveals that correctional practices predominantly focus on the needs of men, ultimately neglecting the gender and culturally specific needs of Indigenous women upon release (Allen & Wardrop, 2022). These shortcomings derive from the state's attempt to Indigenize the white system, which has resulted in interventions that fail to meaningfully acknowledge the intersections of colonialism, sexism, and racism (Monchalin, 2016). Additionally, cultural programming for Indigenous populations in Canadian prisons has been scrutinized for its lack of accessibility, limited cultural understanding among frontline staff, and non-inclusion of Indigenous communities in program planning (Monchalin, 2016). Despite upholding a 'helpful' appearance through the implementation of culturally relevant institutional mandates (Boyce, 2017), carceral practices, including programming, fail to confront the embedded settler colonial oppression

within and beyond the prison context. In doing so, Indigenous women are often deprived of the resources and support to transition into their communities adequately.

### *Responsibilization*

A critical examination of Indigenous women's lack of carceral release planning signals the inherent responsibilization associated with community reunification. Responsibilization is the placement of responsibility on individuals to achieve duties or tasks that were initially the responsibility of state agencies (Avila & Sozzo, 2022). In relation to the carceral state, responsibilization manifests through imposing the expectation on incarcerated individuals to develop a law-abiding and responsible identity through self-accountability (Ellis, 2021). Hence, successful reintegration (i.e., rehabilitation) is delegated to the individual rather than to the state and its actors. Carceral responsibilization has become intensified for Indigenous women due to a lack of culturally relevant programming, release planning, and extended support within the correctional system. However, the complicity of the carceral state in holding Indigenous women responsible for their community reunification has become concealed under the guise of promoting shared responsibility and empowerment between incarcerated individuals and the correctional system (Hannah-Moffat, 2000a). Responsibilization narratives have ultimately become an ideological tool for prisons, allowing them to avoid planning for or addressing structural issues during community reunification that are often beyond Indigenous women's control (Hart, 2017). In this way, a responsibilization framework reveals that Indigenous women's experiences with community reunification are not reflective of their personal shortcomings, but rather, indicative of the systemic culture within prisons.

### *Carceral Recognition Politics*

In addition to responsibilization, understanding the concept of carceral recognition politics is imperative to examining how the correctional system shapes Indigenous women's identities upon their release. Put differently, the carceral state not only has a structural impact on community reunification but also shapes how Indigenous women embody and experience their identity upon release. This is crucial to recognize in terms of identity (trans)formation, as formerly incarcerated Indigenous women's understanding of being does not begin the moment they are released from prison. Rather, their identity is created, learnt, and negotiated *within* carceral spaces and amongst other prison actors. This is important to keep in mind, since carceral practices often confine newly released Indigenous women to an identity that reinforces their need for correction, supervision, and control by the state, as they are deemed incapable of individually accomplishing a prosperous future on the outside (Pulis et al., 2021). Consequently, Indigenous women often experience strict parole practices and community supervision policies, as they are constructed as risky individuals who require ongoing state management.

### *Identity Formation and Kinship Relationships*

While significant research has analyzed the impact of structural barriers post-release, the negotiation of identity remains a critical issue for Indigenous women during their re-entry. As identity formation can be a shifting and ongoing process of becoming, reintegration provides a vital opportunity for Indigenous women to continue to transform their identity. Relationships and social networks are key to this process as they play a decisive and culturally informed role in contextualizing decisions, actions, and behaviours. A relational understanding of the self suggests that individuals often shape their words, decisions, and behaviours to better fit into social relations. This dynamic process is informed by social networks, which not only shape how actions are interpreted but also support individuals in challenging fixed assumptions of behaviour

(Lamont & Molnár, 2002; Pachucki & Breiger, 2010). Put simply, connections with others can assign alternative meanings to an individual's actions. This influence stems from the flow of information within social networks, where nuanced interpretations of behaviours are established, supported and communicated to wider audiences (Lin, 2001). With this power, relationships can contest static perceptions of behaviours and instead offer contextualized, layered accounts of an individual's conduct (Lin, 2001). Given that individual actions exist within a relational understanding of society, behaviours, and ultimately identity, are almost always interpreted and assessed by others. As such, social networks can transform how individuals are socially recognized, as their actions are not confined to incomplete, stereotypical, or misleading understandings. In this way, individual reputations are often shaped by the shared images created and reinforced within social networks (Fine, 2001). Therefore, relationships are pivotal in how an individual's identity is conceptualized, enforced, and later recognized in society.

In the carceral context, relationship building is particularly vital as personal experience inside prison informs identity formation outside prison. This is especially evident in the sisterhood that incarcerated Indigenous women often experience, which plays a pivotal role in promoting healing, strength, empowerment, and connection to culture (Yuen, 2011). These loving and caring relationships provide the support, resources, and community needed for Indigenous women to survive inside prison, but also to (re)connect with their lost culture. Through personal storytelling and collective encouragement to engage in cultural practices, sisterhood facilitates the (re)introduction or resurgence of Indigenous female identity (Yuen & Pedlar, 2009). Sisterhood opens pathways for identity learning, internalization, and survival for Indigenous women both in and outside prison. These carceral relationships teach women the significance of trusting, supporting, and caring relationships in confronting post-release barriers

(Yuen, 2011). In this way, social relationships, kinship and community inside prison can play an active role in the lives of Indigenous women after they have been released from prison.

### *Strengths of Kinship in Addressing Reintegration Barriers*

Beyond fostering empowerment and cultural unity in prison, relationships help alleviate the impact of stigma, reinforce a positive and culturally relevant sense of self, and reduce the risk of recidivism among Indigenous women. These strengths play an active role in reshaping how Indigenous women both understand and experience their identity during reintegration. That said, formerly incarcerated Indigenous women often experience intense stigma, which has been identified as an important issue during the reintegration process. Understood as a marker of deviance, stigma contributes to the negative labelling and social rejection of specific populations (Goffman, 2014). Stigma is experienced by the formerly incarcerated population, where their perceived undesirable characteristics and confinement to specific categories have reduced this population to an unreformable and alienated identity (Feingold, 2021). This can limit the ability of formerly incarcerated individuals to access social services, contribute to their experiences with harmful public stereotyping, as well as increase their likelihood of social withdrawal (Feingold, 2021; Hirschfield & Piquero, 2010; Keene et al., 2018).

Social networks, on the other hand, play a vital role in alleviating the negative social consequences that derive from ‘prisoner’ stigma. For Indigenous women, kinship relationships prevent the imposition of ‘otherness’ on their identity upon carceral release. This is achieved by decentring the individual and emphasizing the importance of a relationship with others and one’s community. Relationships strengthen connections across differences, which not only prevents Indigenous women from experiencing isolation but also encourages their reintegration into the community (Tynan, 2021). Kinship relationships also offer significant guidance and support for

Indigenous women, in the sense that kinship relations provide gentle reminders about one's roles and responsibilities (Berg-Nordlie, 2022). This is essential, as these sorts of relations reinforce what it means to live as an Indigenous woman within a settler colonial society. In other words, kinship networks encourage Indigenous women to reconnect with culturally relevant ideals of being, in contrast to settler-imposed conceptions of their identity (Quinn, 2020). In this way, relationships can be beneficial in preventing recidivism as kin can consistently teach, encourage, or remind Indigenous women that love, responsibility, and respect are integral and ideal ways of being in the social world (Tynan, 2021).

Ultimately, relationships and kinship can cultivate the adoption of new identities away from the ones that have been imposed on formerly incarcerated Indigenous women—identities that oftentimes portray them as deviant, dangerous, and unrespectable. Stated differently, social networks can mitigate the impact of stigmas associated with incarceration by replacing them with promising opportunities and new ways of thinking about oneself. They can reaffirm a positive self-image among those who have been formerly incarcerated in ways they might internalize and present to broader society during their re-entry. Altogether, social relationships can play an influential role in addressing the social challenges of reintegration.

### **Identity, Resurgence, and Decolonization**

The hardships associated with identity transformation for formerly incarcerated Indigenous women during community reunification are often rooted in discourses that view this process as a sign of ongoing oppression, inequality, and settler colonial carceral surveillance. Such discourses are informed by wider debates between abolitionists and penal reformists, where they tend to disagree about the solution to Indigenous women's adverse carceral experiences. Abolitionists inherently question whether prisons can adequately address the varying systemic

harms enacted against Indigenous populations. This perspective is rooted in the belief that prisons are genocidal spaces whereby criminalization, victimization, and oppression constantly reinforce each other to ensure the forced assimilation or disappearance of Indigenous peoples (Grafton et al., 2024). In doing so, abolitionists highlight that violent carceral logics, such as imprisonment, support the settler state's goal of dominating Indigenous people's sense of belonging, signalling the need for new responses to crime and punishment (Laidlaw, 2024). Within this framework, abolitionists argue that prisons are not a space that facilitates the healing and empowerment of Indigenous peoples. Instead, prisons should be understood as places of confinement without inherent moral principles (Carlen, 2004). Although abolitionists recognize the resistance and resilience that Indigenous peoples display against the carceral system, they believe this strength comes at the cost of their well-being. Abolitionists, then, advocate for structural responses to the criminalization of Indigenous peoples to disrupt the ongoing colonial harm perpetuated by incarceration (Grekul, 2020), meaning abolition is fundamentally concerned with eliminating the correctional system, as it emphasizes the importance of alternative, non-colonial models of justice (Kilroy et al., 2013)

Penal reformists, on the other hand, highlight that the negative portrayal of Indigenous initiatives in Canadian prisons derives from a lack of empirical research conducted from Indigenous perspectives. This perspective argues that abolitionists often omit the potential strengths of Indigenized programming, and in turn, prevent the creation and implementation of *more* culturally relevant programming that Indigenous prisoners find beneficial (Tetrault, 2022). They argue for increased Indigenous leadership in corrections, more substantial allocation of resources to Indigenous programming, extensive cultural training for correctional staff, and the increased use of Gladue Reports (Zinger, 2025). Penal reformists ultimately advocate for

pragmatic reforms within the existing correctional system that are politically supported by Indigenous populations, including prisoners themselves (Tetrault, 2022).

### *Identity Transformation as a Form of Resurgence and Decolonization*

While these two competing points of view represent compelling perspectives, the identity (trans)formation that formerly incarcerated Indigenous women experience suggests that there is a more complex story to tell. Indeed, it suggests that the reintegration process is a site where Indigenous resistance, decolonization, and resurgence unfold in complex ways. This is due to the fact that the reshaping of identity provides an opportunity and pathway for Indigenous women to challenge false stereotypes and discourses regarding their identity. Specifically, they can push back against practices of settler domination, as well as reclaim or reconnect with their distinct cultural, social, and political identities. To clarify, Indigenous resurgence refers to a form of revitalization in which Indigenous values and ways of being re-emerge in the face of historic and ongoing settler colonial adversity (Kirmayer et al., 2011). Resurgence can often look like relearning Indigenous language and traditions, instances of individual or collective activism, and the renewal of Indigenous identity (Simpson, 2011). Acts of resurgence largely stem from the shortcomings of formal recognition and accommodation practices that are oftentimes endorsed by settler states.

Glen Coulthard (2014) argues that the politics of recognition refers to a liberal democratic strategy, in which settler states like Canada have begun to politically and symbolically acknowledge Indigenous nationhood. Such political strategies are deemed progressive compared to earlier eras of aggressive assimilation, since these sorts of political gestures tend to recognize more limited forms of Indigenous sovereignty— usually cloaked in the language of ‘reconciliation’ and ‘self-government’. However, this framework incorrectly equates a lack of

formal state recognition as the central source of Indigenous people's settler colonial oppression (Alfred, 2010). As a result, this model fails to meaningfully challenge the structural, gendered, and economic hierarchies that maintain settler colonial power in Canada (Coulthard, 2014). In response, advocates of resurgence emphasize that Indigenous peoples should turn inwards and recognize themselves, thereby turning their back on state recognition (Coulthard, 2014).

### *Resurgence*

Indigenous resurgence has been thought to ensure culturally relevant ways of being in the world, where Indigenous communities focus on reviving their traditions instead of seeking state recognition of their rights—a process that is thought to sustain the settler state instead of disrupting its hegemony (Cunneen & Tauri, 2016). That said, resurgence is thought to complement decolonization movements. Thus, the intersection of resurgence and decolonization is not linear, but reciprocal, in that these two processes can inform or reflect each other. While resurgence moves away from engagement in the politics of state recognition, decolonization seeks to reclaim stolen power from the structures, ideologies, and discourses that have controlled Indigenous communities (Asadullah, 2021). In doing so, decolonization builds upon resurgence as the rejuvenation of culture gives Indigenous communities the power to undermine settler colonial control and reinforce Indigenous sovereignty (Elliott, 2018).

### *Decolonization*

Despite being predominantly structural and political, decolonization unfolds within Indigenous communities in different ways. While challenging structures and social dynamics are significant in achieving decolonization, resistance against settler colonial encroachment can also occur at the personal level. Personal decolonization can be understood as a small-scale form of resistance in which Indigenous individuals critically (re)examine their lives in ways that

recognize how their experiences have been shaped by settler colonialism (Thurston, 2022). As Fanon (1984) argues, colonialism produces ‘colonized subjects’ wherein colonized populations are made to feel psychologically inferior upon the destruction of their culture. Personal decolonization actively works to undo this mindset through the process of decolonizing one’s mind from settler colonial influences (Coulthard, 2014). In doing so, personal decolonization reinforces the self-determination of Indigenous peoples, since it encourages the return of Indigenous freedoms and powers without settler colonial control (Vanthuyne, 2021). This form of decolonization is rooted in everyday acts of renewal that strive to retain, revive, or maintain Indigenous culture (Monchalin, 2016). Ultimately, personal decolonization can be understood as interchangeable with resurgence, as everyday acts of resilience play a fundamental role in advancing Indigenous autonomy.

#### *Community Reunification, Indigenous Female Identity, and Resurgence*

Despite the seeming contradictions in the idea that decolonization might unfold within settler colonial spaces and correctional processes, personal decolonization and resurgence *are* evident in the identity transformation that formerly incarcerated Indigenous women oftentimes experience when they reintegrate into their communities. This kind of decolonization hinges on the development of kinship relationships, as well as relearning Indigenous worldviews and ways of being. Despite correctional programming having serious gaps in terms of access, which greatly reduces its capacity to support Indigenous women, incarcerated Indigenous women still remain committed to (re)learning their identity during imprisonment. For example, Indigenous women have pushed back against carceral definitions of Indigeneity, instead participating in identity-related political acts (Martel & Brassard, 2006). Indigenous women have also advocated for prison modifications and reforms, including increased access to cultural symbols, increased

implementation of programming, and stronger accountability measures for racist staff (Martel & Brassard, 2006). Collectively, these acts of resistance and/or decolonization actively work to question, critique, and disrupt the carceral control enacted against Indigenous women. At the same time, these practices are also integral in the community reunification stage, since these experiences better equip Indigenous women with the tools, resources, and experiences to transform their carceral identity post-release.

Access to community programming and services outside of prison also plays an integral role in cultivating resurgence and personal decolonization. Healing within community programming provides crucial opportunities for women to engage in personal decolonization by building healthy and reciprocal relationships with others. For example, community-based programs emphasize that criminal involvement is part of a wider structural framework rooted in state-imposed inequality (Monchalin, 2016). Community programs thus have the ability to help incarcerated impacted Indigenous women understand and ultimately reject settler colonial impositions that their criminality is indicative of their identity. Additionally, community programs prioritize and elevate Indigenous identity through various cultural exercises, such as drumming, teachings, or talking circles (Monchalin, 2016). Altogether, these practices provide Indigenous women with the opportunity to either (re)learn or (re)attain their cultural identity that was once limited in prison. Stated differently, community organizations emphasize Indigenous values and practices in ways that ensure Indigenous women have the space to express their identity. It is important to note that such acts of resurgence and personal decolonization are also highly relational, since accessing and attending community programming often leads to the development of kinship relationships. These relationships, in turn, support Indigenous women in the face of settler colonial domination. Overall, decolonization and resurgence practices within

the community reunification stage appear to develop and unfold through deeply interpersonal processes that are supported by kinship networks.

## **Conclusion**

The literature presented provides a comprehensive review of formerly incarcerated Indigenous women's identity transformation and community reunification experiences. As Indigenous scholars have highlighted, Indigenous identity is a relational entity that continues to be shaped by the impacts of settler colonialism. This is reflected in the historical context of Indigenous women's incarceration, which continues to serve as a state tool to attack Indigenous female identity and eliminate their power in Canadian society. Yet, research highlights that community reunification remains a crucial carceral stage whereby Indigenous women have the opportunity to learn, navigate and reclaim their cultural identity. Collectively, the re-entry stage provides a space for Indigenous women to express and engage in Indigenous resurgence against the settler state and its oppressive structures.

While research has examined Indigenous women's adverse carceral experiences globally, this literature review demonstrates that there is limited research conducted on their post-release experience in North America. Specifically, the outset of scholarship on Indigenous women's disproportionate reintegration experiences is based in Australia, thereby highlighting the need for applicable research in the Canadian context. Moreover, research has insufficiently examined how social networks, including notions of kinship, are utilized and experienced by Indigenous women during their community reunification. This omission is exacerbated by the fact that in most of the research on Indigenous peoples and their experiences with the carceral state, Indigenous men are oftentimes the focus. Furthermore, while existing research correctly emphasizes the structural barriers and oppressive conditions of reintegration, there remains far less attention on how

formerly incarcerated Indigenous women engage in resurgence and resistance in this settler dominated space.

This thesis, therefore, addresses these gaps in the literature by exploring how Indigenous women transform their identities during community reunification. Particularly, it examines women's experiences in the Canadian settler state to address geographical limitations in the current scholarship. In addition, this thesis highlights the often negated and invisible aspects of reintegration that center on the sense of self, community inclusion, and kinship building. In doing so, I aim to provide a more complex, intersectional, and resurgence-based understanding of this carceral stage that is missing in the current literature. Finally, this thesis engages with shortcomings in scholarship that often frame Indigenous women's carceral outcomes through a stringent dichotomy of solutions. By reimagining what criminal justice can look like for Indigenous peoples in Canada, I seek to demonstrate how penal reform and abolition can be interrelated within the larger context of carceral decolonization.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Introduction**

This chapter draws on settler colonial theory and resurgence literature to examine the space of reintegration after incarceration. As previously highlighted, reintegration is not a simple, objective process but is informed by complex structures and social-legal processes. For Indigenous women, the space of reintegration is further compounded by the impacts of settler colonialism, sexism, and racism in contemporary Canadian society. Despite these challenges, Indigenous women remain committed to resisting carceral control that unfolds during reintegration through cultural resurgence practices. Understanding this contentious nature, therefore, requires a nuanced theoretical approach that recognizes both the oppressive aspects of reintegration and its capacity to facilitate Indigenous resistance and resurgence. By bringing settler colonial theory and theories of resurgence into careful conversation, this chapter explores the inherent contradictions within the space of reintegration that shapes and informs the identity transformation experienced by formerly incarcerated Indigenous women.

Building on this foundation, this chapter incorporates critical insights about the criminal justice system's settler colonial role, while also acknowledging that settler colonialism is an inherently antagonistic relation, meaning that Indigenous peoples continuously resist domination in their lives. Thus, while settler colonialism shapes carceral reintegration, notably through the production of carceral geographies and relations, this chapter also appreciates how Indigenous resurgence and kinship practices also unfold in this space. By exploring this dynamic, this chapter investigates how Indigenous relationalities and resistance emerge within and navigate the wider structures of settler colonialism, meaning this theory chapter is informed by both settler colonial and Indigenous resistance/resurgence scholarship. That is, I use settler colonial theory as a lens to understand the space of reintegration. I also consider how Indigenous identity

formation, kinship relationalities, and resurgence practices unfold within the space of reintegration, meaning this chapter ultimately theorizes reintegration as a point of collision and antagonism between settler colonialism and Indigenous resurgence.

In this chapter, the first section will outline settler colonial theory. From there, the second section will explore the relationship between the logic of elimination and Canadian prisons, which will ultimately highlight how the prison and community reintegration have been framed as reproducing settler colonial relations. The third section examines Indigenous resurgence in order to contextualize how the logic of elimination oftentimes confronts and meets Indigenous resistance. The fourth section extends this conversation by focusing on Indigenous kinship practices, which are critical in the ongoing resistance to settler colonial structures and processes of oppression and erasure. Lastly, in the final section, I will discuss how settler colonialism, including its inherent antagonisms, is integral to understanding Indigenous identity formation, but also community reintegration more broadly, as a contested space for formerly incarcerated Indigenous women. Collectively, these different theoretical insights will provide the tools and conceptual language to identify, understand, and describe reintegration as a dynamic site for Indigenous women.

### **Settler Colonial Theory**

Whereas settler colonialism is the ongoing social and political reality that defines societies like Canada, settler colonialism theory is the theoretical framework and body of scholarship critical to understanding and discussing settler colonialism. Drawing a significant distinction from colonialism and the colonial period, settler colonial theory is focused on comprehending the dispossession and displacement of Indigenous populations from their lands and ways of being (Veracini, 2011). At its core, settler colonial theory defines settler colonialism

as the ongoing project to establish sovereignty on Indigenous lands through the geographical dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their land as well as their ongoing territorial displacement (Harris, 2021). Settler colonial theory points to the commodification and transformation of Indigenous land into private property, which provides settlers with the opportunity to establish a new society and generate economic growth (Burow et al., 2018). Further, unrestricted access to resources such as mining, fishing, forestry and agriculture on Indigenous lands allows settlers to maintain a ‘new world’ that benefits the goals of capitalism (Harris, 2021). This structural invasion is justified by the settler ideology that Indigenous peoples were unsettled, rootless, and nomadic beings whose land could be better utilized by settlers (Wolfe, 2006). Hence, settler colonialism is not primarily motivated by questions of race, ethnicity, or religion, but rather by ensuring settlers’ access to Indigenous lands (Wolfe, 2006).

### *The Logic of Elimination*

Since Indigenous peoples are considered to be ‘in the way’ of settlers’ goals, various physical, cultural, and biological strategies have been used to manage, control, and ultimately eliminate Indigenous communities from their land (Wolfe, 2006). In this way, settler colonialism is driven by a logic of elimination, whereby settlers seek to eliminate the distinct political and social autonomy of Indigenous populations (Wolfe, 2006). Central to the logic of elimination is the process of ‘taking away’ and the subsequent creation of ‘something new’. In the Canadian context, these processes manifest through the destruction of Indigenous societies to make way for settler lifestyles, processes, and institutions. This elimination is positioned as necessary by settlers as Indigenous people’s presence, relationship with, and respect for land fundamentally challenge settlers’ objective to extract from lands, facilitate wealth, and establish a national identity (Tuck & Wayne Yang, 2012). This ideology is further supported by the belief held by

settlers that their cultural and racial superiority serves as a justification for conquering and settling within any land they discover outside Europe (Monchalin, 2016). Therefore, while elimination is primarily motivated by access to and possession of Indigenous land, it simultaneously seeks to replace Indigenous populations entirely. This project results in the enactment of eliminatory tactics/strategies against Indigenous peoples who are characterized as a threat to settler colonial objectives (Crosby & Monaghan, 2012). Elimination, therefore, can be understood as a conceptual trail, whereby capitalism is the primary driving force, which then becomes linked to imperialism and eventually results in the eradication of Indigenous communities (Ajl, 2023). Overall, the logic of elimination emphasizes that Indigenous societies must be expelled from Canada in order to create a new settler society.

### *Strategies of Elimination*

Elimination is not only concerned with the physical or biological eradication of Indigenous peoples. Instead, it has cultural, legal, and political expressions as well. In this way, techniques of elimination utilize different structural practices and approaches to eradicate Indigenous presence. For instance, ethnic transfer, transfer by assimilation, and Indigenous institutionalization are central strategies, or expressions, of settler colonialism's goal of elimination. Ethnic transfer can be understood as the forcible deportation of Indigenous communities from their territory under the authority of settlers (Veracini, 2024). Acting as an expression of spatial and bodily control, ethnic transfer predominantly takes form via the relocation of Indigenous people to reservations. Ultimately, ethnic transfer enables the settler polity to redraw and enforce administrative boundaries on Indigenous rights, lands, and bodies in ways that reproduce settler sovereignty (Veracini, 2024). While not focused on the physical displacement of Indigenous peoples, transfer by assimilation is an additional strategy utilized by

settlers to eliminate Indigeneity. This strategy is concerned with conforming Indigenous peoples to 'better' fit settler notions of racial, behavioural, and cultural normativity (Veracini, 2024). In doing so, this technique actively works to transform and eventually 'uplift' Indigenous communities out of existence. Hence, transfer by assimilation emphasizes coerced lifestyle changes in that the social and political organization of Indigenous livelihood (i.e., laws, governance systems, and traditional forms of economic activity) is transferred away to enable their displacement (Veracini, 2024). Finally, Indigenous institutionalization refers to the forcible transfer of Indigenous peoples to highly regulated state institutions. Achieved by reframing undesirable behaviours and traits, such as associating Indigeneity with criminality, this reclassification process results in Indigenous peoples being removed from their communities and land. In doing so, this strategy seeks to institutionally undermine Indigenous resilience, including their political demands and acts of resistance (Veracini, 2024). Overall, it is crucial to note that these forms of elimination usually unfold at the same time and in ways that complement each other.

### *History of Elimination in Canada*

Beginning in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, Canada has adopted various approaches when it comes to elimination. During the earlier moments of this period, which can generally be understood as the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the relationship between Indigenous people and Canada was structured by social and political exclusion, aggressive assimilation policies, and institutionalization. Central to this relationship were legislation, policies, and a settler governing mentality that emphasized the eradication of Indigenous people in the country. For example, a key method of enacting ethnic transfer is the historic and contemporary use of state-created reservations (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). Reserves tended to be

small, remote, less resourced, and overcrowded. They were created to push First Nations peoples away from their traditional territories to facilitate public and private economic projects. Notably, reserve lands in Canada are not owned by First Nations but are considered Crown lands that are held in trust by the Canadian settler government. Consequently, the power to govern land and territory, which was a political power previously held by Indigenous traditional governments, has been eroded by settler colonial land tenure systems, leading to Indigenous poverty and economic marginalization (Ray, 2016). In other words, Indigenous people have been dispossessed from their land in order to expand settler presence and control.

The Residential School System is another expression of the logic of elimination, where Indigenous peoples experienced institutionalization and aggressive assimilation. As a settler government practice, residential schools operated via the removal of Indigenous children from their families and communities into schools run by numerous church denominations, including the Catholic Church and Anglican Church (Egor, 2020). Upon entry into schools, Indigenous youth were separated from their families, banned from practicing their language, and alienated from Indigenous spiritual practices and beliefs (Woolford & Gacek, 2016). These assimilative practices stemmed from the settler colonial belief that the elimination of Indigenous culture and norms would transform and elevate Indigenous youth into contributing, superior, and respected individuals of Canadian society (Hutchings, 2016). The Canadian state pushed a dominant narrative that portrayed residential schools as a form of humanitarianism for ‘uncivilized’ Indigenous populations. Indigenous youth, however, experienced prolific trauma and abuse (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

By the 1970s, the relationship between Indigenous peoples and the Canadian state started to shift, laying the groundwork for the contemporary relationship between Indigenous people and

Canada. Whereas the mid-19<sup>th</sup> to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century emphasized the elimination of Indigenous peoples through aggressive assimilatory policies, the 1970s saw Canada shift towards a liberal politics of recognition (Coulthard, 2014). As Charles Taylor (1992) argues, within multicultural liberal democracies like Canada, state recognition of minority groups is thought to actively promote peaceful coexistence and reduce differences in colonial contexts by accommodating and preserving cultural distinctiveness or integrity. Framed as an improvement from Canada's previous attempts at elimination, assimilation, and genocide, the politics of recognition is said to work to recognize aspects of Indigenous culture, respect claims for limited autonomy and recognize the elements of Indigenous peoples' unique status in Canada. For example, Canadian governments have begun promoting 'economic reconciliation', where Indigenous communities are now benefiting from economic development that takes place on their traditional lands (Coulthard, 2007). These practices broadly reflect 'settler moves to innocence,' in which settler guilt and complicity are reconciled through recognition strategies that ultimately do not limit settler power, privilege, or promote meaningful change in the interests of Indigenous peoples (Tucker & Yang, 2012). Further, settler access to Indigenous lands and resources remains intact.

Therefore, this new relational dynamic between Indigenous peoples and the Canadian state remains a site of settler colonial tension, as there are still limits on what the state is willing to recognize. That is, the politics of recognition falls well short of recognizing Indigenous sovereignty. As Franz Fanon (1952) articulated, recognition remains in the interests of the oppressor, as it is a form of colonial power whereby the colonized subject becomes attached to settler-imposed forms of recognition. Ultimately, this psycho-affective internalization serves as an economic and political tool to maintain settler colonial relations, as the boundaries of Indigenous existence are in the hands of settler society and governments (Coulthard, 2007).

Settler colonialism's shifting approach to Indigenous relations points to an integral idea that animates settler colonial theory, which is that settler colonialism is an ongoing process rather than a historical occurrence. As Patrick Wolfe puts it, settler colonialism is a 'structure and not an event' (2006). This means settler colonialism and the logic of elimination are organizing principles within settler societies and will continue to be as settlers move across time and space (Veracini, 2011, Glenn, 2015). While settler colonial theory can be interpreted as an overly broad theory, in recent years, its core tenets have been applied to various social and political structures and systems affecting Indigenous communities. This is evident, for example, in the way scholars have started to interpret the Canadian Criminal Justice System, where many point out that Canada's eliminatory intentions continue to be expressed through systems of carceral containment and the control of Indigenous bodies. Seen this way, settler colonial theory provides a critical insight into how prisons have become an instrument of settler colonial domination to express the logic of elimination against Indigenous peoples through physical dispossession, removal, and the disruption of community-based kinship relations.

### **Settler Carceral Power and Prisons**

While racial bias is often rendered as the primary driver of disproportionate carceral expansion, this explanation alone is insufficient to contextualize the proliferation of Indigenous incarceration in Canada. To clarify, racial bias is limited, as it offers a social critique that condemns criminal justice actors and systemic bias, which ultimately overlooks prison expansion as a political strategy that functions to serve settler state imperatives (Nichols, 2014). In contrast, settler colonial theory, when applied to the criminal justice system, frames prisons and prison expansion as a form of settler state violence, where the state's power to create a racialized hierarchy actually reproduces the socio-spatial isolation of Indigenous populations in Canada.

As Vicki Chartrand (2019) argues, settler colonialism is informed by an episteme that includes the specific logics and modes of reasoning for colonial discourses and practices. This episteme has become embedded in the prison context, where carcerality has become a fundamental logic for enacting the elimination of Indigeneity in Canada (Barker, 2025). To elaborate, as the penitentiary emerged alongside the settler colonial project, the prison and its use of segregation, containment, and assimilation were all meant to control and eventually eliminate entire populations (Chartrand, 2019). In this way, the prison transformed into a legal tool that allowed settlers to dispossess Indigenous communities through the control of their movement, the use of disciplinary punishment, as well as forced labour, which collectively worked to reinforce the settler colonial regulation of Indigenous bodies (Venczel, 2024). This sort of control and dominance was necessary as Indigenous existence fundamentally weakened the legitimacy of settler states. In short, prioritizing settler colonialism within discussions of Indigenous experiences with the criminal justice system challenges the apolitical framing of prisons, where they are frequently naturalized and detached from their larger role in state formation and the maintenance of territorialized settler sovereignty (Nichols & Swiffen, 2018).

### *Whiteness and the Carceral State*

Carceral settler colonialism is driven by racialized political violence, which has led to the establishment of penal systems and institutions in Canada. As Rai Reece (2020) argues, whiteness is an inherent ontological practice of the settler state that serves to designate spaces and specific bodies as either desirable or unworthy for nation-building. Using whiteness as the universal standard of social life, settlers rely on this social norm to enforce strict expectations of acceptable behaviours, values, and norms in Canadian society (Bonds & Inwood, 2016). However, these standards operate as a tool of racial control, as social groups who do not conform

to rigid directives are deemed incompatible and incapable of co-existing alongside settlers. Within this logic, whiteness actively works to associate Indigenous bodies as unfit for nation-building to ensure the dominance of a white settler society. This is achieved through the memorializing of Indigenous bodies via colonial power. As Sherene Razack (2015) argues, Indigenous bodies have become pathologized as impure, dirty, and inherently violable, therefore legitimizing their socio-spatial expulsion from settler society. It is through this epistemology of whiteness that penal nationalism emerges as a nation-building strategy to remove Indigenous peoples from settler society.

### *Penal Nationalism*

Defined as a response to social threats, penal nationalism relies on criminalization and penalization as coercive control mechanisms to prevent the upward mobility of groups deemed as threats to the national identity and sovereignty of settler nations (Barker, 2019). Stated differently, this expression of state power refers to the confinement and expulsion of Indigenous populations to develop a nation-state void of unwanted populations, who are characterized as threats to the inherent values of a white nation (Evans, 2021). In doing so, penal nationalism works to ensure that whiteness is created, reinforced, and communicated in settler states via penal processes. Rooted in whiteness, carceral settler colonialism provides power, legitimacy, and sustenance to Canada's foundation as a settler state. As a result, the carceral state has emerged as an institution that operates to erase, displace, and objectify Indigenous communities, while simultaneously validating whiteness as the cornerstone of Canada.

### *Carceral Redlining*

This settler objective is achieved via carceral redlining, a practice whereby Indigenous communities are deliberately subjected to criminalization and eventual incarceration by

constellations of socio-political networks that strive to preserve the interests of settler power (Reece, 2020). Ultimately, carceral redlining is a social control mechanism wherein Indigenous bodies and the spaces they inhabit are disproportionately targeted by police and prisons, which facilitates their physical, emotional, political, and spatial exclusion from settler society (Reece, 2020). Accordingly, incarceration has become a useful tool to attain this settler colonial objective as it maintains colonial authority over Indigenous existence through the control of movement, physical punishment, and racialized exploitation (Chartrand, 2019). In doing so, this exclusionary practice facilitates the violent and forced displacement of Indigenous populations, which reinforces settler society's claims to Indigenous land and resources. In other words, by maintaining the persistent disappearance of Indigenous peoples, settlers can feel entitled to own Indigenous lands as Indigenous communities are constantly vanishing from society (A. Smith, 2016). This rationale is motivated by colonial racial capitalism, which seeks to dislocate Indigenous people through the destruction of culture, language, and kinship to support the settler state's ability to extract, expand, and profit off Indigenous lands and resources (Venzel, 2024).

### *Incarceration, Indigeneity and Elimination*

Taken together, these insights help in moving past traditional, misinformed, and therefore stereotypical understandings of Indigenous incarceration. Specifically, a settler colonial frame demonstrates that prisons are not simply a neutral response to crime or a fair state apparatus, but rather an instrument that supports and maintains modern settler colonial violence in Canada. In this way, this theory helps inform one side of the reintegration experience as it contextualizes how the logic of elimination is purposely embedded within the correctional system to ensure the disappearance and eventual elimination of Indigenous peoples. Notably, the correctional system removes Indigenous peoples from social participation, reduces their community presence, and

enforces assimilatory pressure to disrupt nations, communities, and politics from current settler colonial spaces (Barker, 2019). By doing so, incarceration weakens Indigenous relationality (politically, socially, and economically) to suppress any threats to settler colonial dominance. In this way, the correctional system contributes to a ‘carceral churn’ whereby the constant removal or assimilation of Indigenous bodies via incarceration is encouraged to allow settlers to achieve their overall goal of removing Indigeneity from Canada altogether. While settler colonialism theory predominantly focuses on understanding the logics, behaviours, and impacts of settler colonialism on settler societies, settler colonial theorists and scholars have started to incorporate Indigenous perspectives in ways that appreciate and acknowledge Indigenous experiences, including their acts of resistance, resurgence, and anti-colonial struggle (Veracini, 2017). This is crucial, as although settler colonialism is a structure that organizes settler societies, it also informs Indigenous people’s experiences, including how they continue to resist their very elimination. In short, settler colonial theory, in its fullest form is helpful in illustrating the antagonistic nature of settler colonialism itself.

### **Resurgence**

Despite strenuous state attempts at eradication, Indigenous peoples have continuously resisted their elimination throughout the history of Canada. As a result, the control and elimination of Indigenous peoples is not a foregone conclusion in settler societies. While Indigenous peoples have rejected the deterministic outcome of settler colonialism, settler colonial theory has been critiqued for being complicit in obscuring Indigenous peoples’ ability to exist and resist in light of settler colonial attempts of elimination (Kauanui, 2016). This limitation derives from settler colonial theory’s focus on the decisions, consciousness, and role of settlers in reproducing settler colonial relations (Mamdani, 2015). As a result, Indigenous

scholars have criticized the theoretical framework for overemphasizing the genocidal result of settler colonialism, thereby masking, displacing, or overshadowing variations of Indigenous resistance (Snelgrove et al., 2014). Ultimately, settler colonial theory has been questioned for its role in perpetuating the notion that Indigenous populations are passive victims of domination who must accept the reality of settler colonialism (Schayegh, 2024).

In response to these limitations, scholars have developed theoretical counterarguments that center Indigeneity and resurgence as a key feature within settler colonialism theory. Indigenous scholars have shifted from theorizing settler colonialism as an unstoppable force of domination to recognizing it as inherently antagonistic in nature. In fact, contemporary scholarship argues that while settler colonialism is a structure that organizes societies like Canada, Indigenous people continue to reject settler attempts at oppression. Hence, scholars have highlighted that Indigenous resurgence is a fundamental aspect of the settler colonial experience, as Indigenous peoples have consistently created alternative social realities to transform the settler colonial status quo (Elliott, 2018). Central to this development is the emphasis on Indigenous peoples' experiences with, and mobilization of, resistance and resurgence.

### *Psychological Impacts of Settler Colonial Violence*

Resurgence is largely shaped by Indigenous people's experiences with settler colonialism, which creates the conditions and environment for cultural revitalization to occur. While the structural impacts of settler colonialism continue to be explored in the literature, scholars have simultaneously examined how settler colonialism disrupts Indigenous people's sense of self. As Gerald Alfred (2023) explains, settler colonial violence has led Indigenous peoples to adopt negative self-perceptions of themselves. This is critical to understanding settler colonialism from an Indigenous perspective, as negative self-conception has prevented Indigenous people from

recreating themselves through their own land, culture, and language (Alfred, 2023). This in turn actively supports the settler state's goal of erasing Indigenous peoples as distinct peoples, as they can be better absorbed into Canadian society.

Central to this concept is the work of Franz Fanon and Alfred Memmi, who recognized the psychological objectives of settler colonialism. Despite not using the language of settler colonialism in their work, other scholars have used their insights to understand settler colonialism and its impacts on Indigenous peoples. Particularly, Fanon and Memmi's arguments further our understanding as to how the displacement of Indigenous peoples from their lands, communities, and the settler state itself affects the psychology of Indigenous peoples. Fanon (1952) argues that the use of physical violence is not powerful enough for the complete dispossession of Indigenous people from their land. Instead, the degradation of Indigenous peoples is essential for achieving the objectives of settler colonialism. In other words, Fanon (1984) demonstrates that the association of Indigenous peoples as animalistic, evil, and cruel allow settlers to justify their use of violence when exploiting Indigenous land. By assigning and equating the customs, traditions, and values of the Indigenous community with depravity, settlers justify violent displacement as the only solution to this socio-cultural issue. As a result, Indigenous peoples' state of being becomes manipulated for settlers' benefit to exploit land. Memmi (1967) contributes to this argument by demonstrating how Indigenous populations are inherently eliminated from their land through the destruction of their identity. By consistently excluding Indigenous peoples from having a role in their community, settlers aim to ensure that Indigenous peoples become divorced from their reality (Memmi, 1967). In doing so, settler colonialism actively removes any cultural or social responsibility and agency previously held by Indigenous peoples. This logic derives from the settler's objective to limit any courage, self-

assurance, or resistance from Indigenous peoples during their forced displacement (Memmi, 1967). Altogether, a psychological analysis within settler colonial theory reveals the intersection between dispossession, identity, and power.

Settler colonialism, therefore, must be understood in terms of how it impacts Indigenous peoples through the disruption of their sense of self and relationships with others. To clarify, settler state policies center on systemically erasing and denying Indigenous existence, facilitating a lack of belonging, and delegitimizing Indigenous identity. In doing so, the settler state actively relies on psychological violence as a form of control and containment of Indigeneity (Alfred, 2023). The erasure of Indigenous existence is reflected through specific expressions of settler nationalism, wherein the settler state effectively creates an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ dichotomy. This division derives from nationalism’s ability to produce a settler identity and strong attachment to colonized territory (Henderson, 2017). As a result, Indigenous peoples are frequently constructed as ‘alien’ and, therefore, a threat to the settler collective. In response, settler nationalism, operationalized through state policies, attempts to eliminate Indigenous identity to ensure the continued existence of the settler state.

The use of state policies as a psychological tool is most evident when analyzing residential schools and the 60s Scoop, which significantly impacted Indigenous people and their sense of self. While these state policies do not reflect the entirety of Canada’s assimilation project, they nonetheless stand out as critically important expressions of the logic of elimination that fundamentally (re)shaped Indigenous livelihoods and well-being. For instance, through punishing children for engaging in cultural practices, residential schools actively taught Indigenous youth to be ashamed of their culture (McQuaid et al., 2017). This objective was motivated by the settler state’s attempts to ‘kill the Indian in the child’ to ensure their

assimilation into European ideals. As a result, Indigenous youth were severely prohibited and punished for engaging in spiritual practices, speaking in their native tongue, or maintaining cultural traditions, as residential schools conveyed that Indigenous culture was illegal, primitive, and undesirable (Rothe et al., 2006). These practices, ultimately, had lifelong impacts, as consistent inferiority messaging on Indigenous culture resulted in beliefs that it was shameful and unacceptable to be an Indigenous individual. This cultural abuse produced low self-worth, as survivors developed internalized oppression (i.e., adoption of negative beliefs of self due to systematic discrimination), wherein they experienced chagrin when acknowledging their culture (Barker et al., 2019). Consequently, this sentiment produced a ‘wall of silence’ whereby survivors learnt the value of silence, ceased discussions on their cultural experiences, and avoided disagreements, which further contributed to poor self-expression and self-worth (Rothe et al., 2006). As a result of low self-worth, survivors are more likely to engage in deviant behaviours such as alcoholism, drug addiction, and suicidal ideation as coping mechanisms for the effects of residential schools on their well-being (Barker et al., 2019). It is important to recognize that the effects of residential schools remain prevalent today, as the inability to communicate, cultural erasure, and loss of belonging have been passed down through generations, leading to intergenerational impacts on well-being (Bombay et al., 2011).

Along with the residential school system, the 60s Scoop was an additional state policy that severely impacted Indigenous people’s understanding of self. With the discreditation of residential schools, the child welfare system became a contemporary tool for the state to achieve its continued goal of assimilation (Alston-O’Connor, 2019). Ultimately, the 60s Scoop saw the forcible removal of Indigenous children from their birth families and subsequent placement into non-Indigenous foster care or adoptive homes (Benoit et al., 2022). Through the forced

separation of children from their families and communities, the 60s Scoop actively destroyed the kinship networks of Indigenous peoples. As interconnectedness is foundational to Indigenous being, the breaking of kinship relationships presents a serious threat to Indigenous people's sense of self. Particularly, the destruction of kinship networks strongly prevents cultural, spiritual, and communal connections that are integral for individual identity (Wilson, 2008). Consequently, the loss of kinship often results in feelings of loss, isolation, and inability to develop a culturally relevant healthy sense of self (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). This is especially relevant for 60s Scoop survivors who, through a loss of access to the teaching, ceremonies, and narratives once provided by their kin, were unable to envision and practice what it means to be Indigenous (Alston O-Connor, 2019). This disconnection was further intensified due to the lack of initiative from white adoptive parents to teach and support Indigenous children's cultural and ancestral roots (Nuttgens, 2013).

Similar to residential schools, this separation from culture perpetuated 'Native shame' whereby the prioritization of white Western society actively worked to devalue, deny, and erase Indigenous children's connection to their culture (Cardinal, 2016). Due to this low connectedness to culture, survivors of the 60s Scoop are at a higher risk of experiencing poor mental health, substance use, poverty, and social isolation as they cope with the consequences to their wellbeing from childhood (Choate et al., 2019). Altogether, it is clear that the 60s Scoop, through its assimilatory agenda, impacted the sense of self amongst many Indigenous peoples due to the confusion, isolation, and subsequent loss of cultural identity. Therefore, when trying to understand why Indigenous peoples might have low-self-esteem and/or engage in harmful coping mechanisms, it is important to contextualize Indigenous individuals' psychological wellbeing in the context of these violent acts of assimilation and erasure enforced by the state.

### *Resurgence as a Response to settler colonial violence*

Resurgence has emerged as a response to the legacies of harm perpetuated by settler colonialism. As Alfred (2023) argues, resurgence seeks to restore what settler colonialism took from Indigenous people, such as their community unity, connection to the land, and understanding of the self. In doing so, resurgence is concerned with addressing the isolation associated with living within the settler state's vision of what an Indigenous person is. Cultural resurgence itself has had a long history in Canada. In the early 1950's, for example, Indigenous spirituality was no longer criminalized by the Indian Act, leading to Indigenous spirituality being practiced more openly in Indigenous communities across Canada (Palmer, 2013). The Red Power movement, which largely emerged in the 1960s, also had a role in cultivating cultural resurgence, as Indigenous activist groups of the time oftentimes incorporated spirituality and cultural teachings into their daily and political praxis (Harper, 1979). Although resurgence practices have a rich and distinct history in Indigenous communities dating back to at least the 1950s, awareness of the significance of resurgence as a decolonial and anti-colonial praxis has only started to inform the academy and how it understands and frames contemporary Indigenous politics and the Indigenous-Canada relationship (Martínez, 2022).

Resurgence, therefore, is the reconnection of culture, land and community to renew Indigenous livelihoods (Corntassel, 2012). This includes celebrating Indigenous presence, (re)building community, reinvesting in Indigenous ways of being, reclaiming traditional practices and working to create healthy lives for present and future Indigenous generations (Simpson, 2001). In this way, resurgence focuses on rebuilding Indigenous identity and sense of self without permission or engagement from the Canadian state, as the focus should not be on reforming the colonial outside, but on flourishing the Indigenous inside (Simpson, 2011). Although there is no definitive model for engaging in resurgence, historical patterns of thought

and directions exist for engaging in resurgence practices. For instance, resurgence can occur through a reconnection with land and geography to understand the ancestral teachings and values that create an authentic Indigenous existence (Alfred & Corntassel, 2005). Recovering Indigenous languages is another example of resurgence, as this practice revitalizes Indigenous ways of knowing, being and relating beyond colonial frameworks (Alfred & Corntassel, 2005). Resurgence can also manifest through relationship-building and mentorship, in small personal groups or one-on-one meetings, which can strengthen community solidarity and cultural connection (Alfred & Corntassel, 2005). The decolonization of diet is also a resurgence practice, as cultivating one's own food, shelter, clothing, and medicines helps Indigenous individuals return to the hard-working, active lives once practiced by their ancestors (Coté, 2016). Notably, confronting fears perpetuated by colonial powers that seek to dominate Indigenous peoples remains an ongoing form of resurgence that seeks to free Indigenous peoples from the constraints of colonial existence (Alfred & Corntassel, 2005). Resurgence has also shifted to the online sphere, where Indigenous communities have used social media to share resurgence practices and create a safe space that promotes wellness (Corntassel et al., 2020). As these examples show, there is no monolithic approach to resurgence, but rather a diverse set of actions aimed at fostering the flourishing of the 'Indigenous inside'.

Altogether, resurgence focuses on opening and maintaining a pathway for authentic Indigeneity to survive through the reclaiming, renaming, and representing of Indigenous identity (Coulthard, 2014). As Simpson (2016) highlights, this motivation is rooted in centering grounded normativity (i.e., the system of ethics that constitutes Indigenous life) to break free from the violences of settler colonialism. To achieve this, resurgence works to tackle settler colonial logics such as white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and capitalism to actualize Indigenous alternatives

such as Indigenous language regeneration, cultural practices, land management, and spiritual connection, which collectively support the re-emergence of Indigenous identity (Simpson 2016). In doing so, resurgence seeks to regenerate the cultural practices, ancestral ways of living, and grounded normativity to center an Indigenous sense of being in contemporary society. In summary, resurgence is a generative process that aims to restore and promote culturally relevant ways of living to enable Indigenous pride, identity, and a deeper sense of belonging.

### *Kinship as Resurgence*

It is important to keep in mind that resurgence is not a monolithic concept but rather, involves dynamic and evolving practices. Central to resurgence is the process of engaging in critical self-reflection to recognize and dismantle harmful settler conditions that contribute to oppression in Indigenous communities. For instance, land acknowledgements are a significant resurgence practice, as they transform place-making from a superficial settler gesture into one that reconnects Indigenous communities to their landscapes, place in the world, and reaffirms relationships with the land as a kinship-based relation that helps weave a future forward for belonging. In addition, by maintaining a deep spiritual connection to an Indigenous ethos, resurgence can manifest through Indigenous people's refusal of settler attempts at enclosure, reclaiming Indigenous spaces, and maintaining collective wellbeing through reciprocal exchanges of support (Million, 2023). The disruption of colonial imposed gender binaries is another crucial example of resurgence, since challenging settler heteronormativity allows Indigenous individuals to promote ethics of care and engage in mutual, respectful, and generous relationships with each other, which remain core principles of Indigenous livelihood (Hunt, 2023).

While not exhaustive of all forms of resurgence, these examples demonstrate how diverse resurgence practices are rooted in the practice of (re)establishing kinship relationships, which is critical, since kinship formations sustain Indigenous livelihoods. Cornthassel (2012) states that kinship strengthens spiritual, social, and political organization which provides opportunities for personal and community acts of Indigenous renewal. Through a deep love for family, land, and community, Indigenous peoples have increased their solidarity, knowledge, and leadership to collectively disrupt traditional forms of settler colonial power (Moreno, 2019). In doing so, rebuilding kinship needs to be understood as an expression of resurgence with significant decolonial/political effects, as it promotes Indigenous identity and supports cultural revitalization to resist settler colonialism (Simpson, 2017).

While Indigenous kinship has been framed by anthropologists, historians, and other social scientists as merely being a cultural or social concept (i.e., kinship as a series of diverse familial or social networks), Indigenous people continue to mobilize kinship formations as inherently *political relations or formations* that challenge settler colonial frameworks and understandings (Rifkin, 2024). This is reflected in the power of kinship in resisting gender and sexual hierarchies that suppress culturally relevant ways of being. For example, in response to the rise of colonial patriarchy in communities, Indigenous women have developed relationships and subsequently organized together to defy Western gendered expectations (Knickerbocker, 2020). Such kinship formations derive from their desire to restore the power Indigenous women once held in various communities. As a form of resistance to the settler state, Indigenous women have frequently taught cultural education and led community-based workshops that introduce and sustain culturally relevant understandings of Indigenous womanhood (Knickerbocker, 2020). In doing so, Indigenous women use kinship to engage in acts of refusal that reaffirm

Indigenous principles and self-determination. This process is similar to that of Two-Spirit individuals who have worked toward decolonizing sexuality. By coming together to organize and mobilize, members of this community have reclaimed cultural traditions that actively challenge rigid heteropatriarchal gender roles (Pyle, 2020). Kinship relations have allowed the community to demonstrate that change is inherent to Indigenous culture, emphasize diverse gender identities, and ultimately challenge colonial attempts at reducing Indigenous people's agency to practice fluidity (Pyle, 2020). Collectively, kinship helps reconstruct individuals' roles and community spaces that better reflect Indigenous values.

Along with dismantling settler social and cultural practices, kinship actively supports Indigenous modes of governance. It is crucial, however, to understand that kinship is an *institution* within Indigenous governance, just as much as it is a practice. That is, diverse kinship networks establish the structure of Indigenous Nations. At the same time, however, kinship is also a dynamic *lived* process, in the sense that it is expressed between kin relatives through daily acts of reciprocity, care, dialogue, and the enactment of responsibilities (Justice, 2008). Put simply, kinship shapes both the socio-legal-political framework of Indigenous societies, while also creating and sustaining Indigenous livelihoods through relational practice. The centrality of kinship-as-political stems from how many forms of traditional Indigenous governance build upon kinship connections, feelings, and lived sensations with both human and non-human relations (N. J. Wilson & Inkster, 2018). In other words, relational processes, everyday interactions, and networks of responsibility are the foundation of Indigenous governance. In this way, social relationships across time and space have become deeply embedded in the political obligations, actions, and legal traditions of Indigenous communities (MacDougall, 2006).

While settler colonialism attempted to depoliticize and also, *eliminate* kinship structures in order to prevent alternative political systems that challenge settler authority, Indigenous people continue to mobilize kinship relations as a way to reclaim Indigenous modes of governance. For instance, social relationships support collective decision-making in communities that are independent of the settler state, reaffirm shared responsibility for resource allocation and placemaking, as well as ensure that Indigenous identities and lands experience intergenerational continuity (Todd, 2020). By engaging in kinship formations and practices, Indigenous peoples actively create alternatives to the rigid, oppressive, and assimilatory structures imposed by settler colonialism.

#### *The Political Significance of Resurgence in the Face of the Politics of Recognition*

While resurgence carries significant socio-cultural significance, it also holds deep political and/or decolonial significance for Indigenous communities. When exploring the meaning of resurgence, Coulthard (2014) provides important insights, notably in his assessment of the politics of recognition, where he advocates rejecting the politics of recognition and instead embracing resurgence. More specifically, Coulthard (2014) argues that the terms of recognition-based politics are usually determined in ways that favour the settler state and society, where state recognition of Indigenous rights does not equate to a reciprocal relationship between the state and Indigenous peoples. Rather, such agreements reproduce colonial power dynamics that serve the interests of both government and industry. As the settler state seeks to exploit Indigenous lands and resources, it actively sets the boundaries of recognition to ‘domesticate’ Indigenous nationhood (Coulthard, 2014). That is, controlled recognitions allow the state to recognize a limited set of cultural rights that are not attached to notions of Indigenous sovereignty or independent political economies, ensuring that Indigenous peoples remain under colonial

jurisdiction. In doing so, this limited scope of recognition prevents Indigenous self-determination by maintaining that Indigenous peoples' attempts for independence remain within and under the control of settler colonial systems (Coulthard, 2014). In other words, Indigenous practices, existence, and sovereignty are recognized to the extent that they do not disrupt the ongoing settler colonial project in Canada (Alfred, 2023). Ultimately, state recognition can become affirmative, rather than transformative (Mookherjee, 2005).

With these insights about the politics of recognition in mind, the call to 'turn away' and prioritize resurgent practices gains critical significance. Leanne Simpson (2011) notes that resurgence should not be conflated with a social movement aimed at making demands from the state. Rather, the core purpose of resurgence is the cultural revitalization of Indigenous communities and societies. This is embodied through a resurgent politics of recognition, which Coulthard (2014) argues is the critical revaluation, reconstruction and redeployment of Indigenous cultural forms to confront the structural and psycho-affective mechanisms associated with colonial domination. Resurgence practices therefore provide a foundation for establishing Indigenous alternatives that not only reaffirm traditional values but also provide a solution to broader political issues facing Indigenous communities (Alfred, 1999). These practices include blockading to protect land and sovereignty, establishing economies that support consensus decision making and subsistence-based activities, along with forging national alliances to reduce the urban/reserve divide among Indigenous peoples (Coulthard, 2014). Central to these practices is the capacity to enact cultural ways of life and community that are core to Indigenous communities. In doing so, resurgence practices regenerate political, intellectual and legal traditions that collectively reclaim and reinvest in Indigenous ways of being (Simpson, 2011).

## **Theorizing the Space of Reintegration**

Reintegration has been referred to as the complex process of returning to the community, where formerly incarcerated individuals adjust to life outside prison and attempt to adopt a crime-free lifestyle (Laub & Sampson, 2003; Davis et al., 2013). However, reintegration is also informed and shaped by a network of contradictory patterns and systems of governance, including ongoing carceral surveillance, community reunification, and community support. For Indigenous peoples, and especially Indigenous women, the space of reintegration is heavily informed by settler carceral logics aimed at controlling their livelihoods. At the same time, reintegration also means (re)establishing important kinship relations, which includes reuniting with community and/or family members, accessing critical social services, and pursuing personal and collective healing. Because of this, community reintegration for Indigenous women defies accusations of being *solely* informed by ongoing carceral governance and surveillance, since reintegration simultaneously speaks to Indigenous personal agency, as well as Indigenous kinship practices and collective governance. The space of reintegration, therefore, points to and reifies the inherent antagonism of settler colonialism itself, where on the one hand, reintegration for Indigenous women is shaped by carceral power, and on the other, by the highly relational forms of resurgence and kinship formation that are integral to Indigenous communities.

### *Carceral Geography*

Within the critical literature on the criminal justice system, an important stream of scholarship known as carceral geography generally frames community reintegration as an extension of the carceral system outside the walls of the prison. As Dominique Moran (2014) contributes, carceral geography critiques the inside/outside binary associated with the correctional system, but the prison more specifically. Carceral geographers point out that punishment and control unfold beyond the prison's walls, where release conditions, including

bail, probation, or parole conditions, constitute another form of prison-like control and surveillance (Moran, 2014). Indeed, the way such conditions are enforced and carried out, including the way that criminalized folks are tasked with reshaping their behaviours in specific ways, suggests that the ‘carceral’ is fundamentally a spatial and *embodied* concept, where its influence is not confined to the strict boundaries of formal prison spaces (Gill et al., 2018). This has led to the development of the idea of ‘transcarceral spaces’, which mimic conditions of confinement that sustain carceral control outside the boundaries of the prison (Bloch & Olivares-Pelayo, 2024). For instance, the environments and locations of halfway houses, the micromanagement through parole conditions, the constant monitoring by parole officers, and invasive electronic monitoring have been argued to collectively resemble life inside prison (Moran, 2014). In this way, reintegration and being ‘released’ do not equate with being ‘free’, since recently released persons usually have severe limitations placed on their ability to engage in certain relationships, movement, as well as access certain spaces. That is, conditions of reintegration reinforce the power of the carceral state by continuing to regulate their bodies, movement, and relationships. Ultimately, this concept reinforces the argument that reintegration is a critical part of the settler colonial carceral continuum.

### *Carceral Citizenship*

While carceral geography theorizes how and why the space of reintegration is structured by carceral logics, the concept of carceral citizenship explains how this space is embodied and experienced by formerly incarcerated people. Understood as the process of weakening legal/civic belonging in society, carceral citizenship is a separate form of socio-political membership for formerly incarcerated individuals (Miller & Stuart, 2017). This unique citizenship is shaped by criminal convictions, which serve as a guideline for defining an individual’s relationship and

sense of belonging to society. As a result, this has created carceral citizens with distinct rights, responsibilities, and restrictions in their daily lives due to their contact with the carceral state. Although this form of citizenship does not necessarily create second-class or custodial citizens, it nonetheless represents an alternative legal reality for incarcerated impacted individuals (Miller & Stuart, 2017). However, this reality is far from neutral, as laws, entitlements, and duties under carceral citizenship create inequitable outcomes and repercussions. This is because formerly incarcerated individuals are never provided full citizenship rights and privileges upon release, but rather, they become subjected to exclusionary conditions of citizenship (Miller & Stuart, 2017). In this way, carceral citizenship fundamentally and quite often negatively alters the lived experience of formerly incarcerated individuals during reintegration. For example, carceral citizens frequently experience a loss of legal rights (i.e., voting), restrictions on their mobility, discrimination in labour markets, and over-regulation/scrutiny of their actions post carceral release (Ewald, 2024). These experiences are rooted in stigma, as formerly incarcerated individuals are dehumanized, mischaracterized as a dangerous class, and fail to receive recognition of a holistic identity due to their criminal history (Ben-Natan et al., 2024). Consequently, carceral citizenship increases the risk of alienation during reintegration, as the conditions within this space reinforce a lack of complete belonging and acceptance for incarcerated impacted populations (Khan, 2022). Carceral citizenship ultimately highlights how the space of reintegration influences the perception, treatment, and participation of formerly incarcerated individuals in society.

### *Connection to the Logic of Elimination*

Taken together, the aspects of carceral geography and citizenship are an expression of the logic of elimination against Indigenous women in Canada. As Wolfe (2001) highlights, the logic

of elimination is not always expressed through physical genocide, but can instead manifest through eradicating Indigenous peoples' social, spatial, and political presence in society. Reintegration is a key mechanism of this settler objective, as this space is deliberately designed to achieve this goal. Carceral geography, for instance, emphasizes how reintegration is structured to limit the agency and independence of Indigenous women. Through discreetly imposing carceral processes and practices during re-entry, reintegration structures the conditions and environments for Indigenous women's post-carceral lives. This spatial power also enables the settler state to regulate the movement of Indigenous women and ultimately attain its objective in severing connections to their land or relationships. This influence is necessary, as it is through the controlling of Indigenous women's mobility, connections, and ways of being that Canada effectively restricts their ability to be present in their communities and society. While not over-deterministic in nature, carceral geographies do limit the ability of Indigenous women to develop kinship relationships and engage in resurgence practices.

Within this structure, reintegration produces carceral citizenship, which serves as a mechanism for enacting elimination against Indigenous women. Put differently, carceral citizenship actively facilitates Indigenous women's disappearance from society. This occurs through subjecting incarcerated Indigenous women to a diminished, immoral, and risky status to ensure that their membership in Canadian society is never entirely accepted. In doing so, this maintains Indigenous women's perpetual exclusion, as their contact with Canada's carceral systems disavows and systematically removes their involvement in social, economic, or political decision making. The limitation placed on their full participation in society is crucial in informing what reintegration looks like for Indigenous women, as it intensifies the alienation and subsequent removal Indigenous women experience in Canadian society. In this way, carceral

citizenship further supports settler colonialism's ongoing attempt to weaken Indigenous women's personhood and reduce their sense of belonging.

### *Incorporating Indigenous Manifestations of Reintegration*

While reintegration can be experienced as the extension of the prison into their post-carcerall lives, Indigenous people also experience reintegration as a moment, or process, of community reunification and return. Indeed, Indigenous peoples who are reintegrating back into society can and do reconnect with each other after periods of settler colonial disruption and trauma. The space of reintegration is therefore marked by inclusion, rather than exclusion, which is typically how the critical scholarship frames this space. Overall, while reintegration is recognized as an inherently harsh space, Indigenous peoples continue to disrupt this hegemonic oppression by bringing their own perspectives and obligations into this space.

Indigenous conceptualizations of reintegration are best reflected in the mutual support offered during re-entry. Since many Indigenous communities support collective healing over continued punishment, relational support through access to community services and the rekindling of relationships is a common feature of reintegration. This support derives from the understanding that reintegration is a process of transitioning out of harmful settler spaces and returning to community. Developing kinship relationships is thus key to reintegration, as it provides Indigenous peoples the opportunity to engage in this space according to their social, cultural, and political worldviews (Varcoe et al., 2020). This guiding principle of cultural reciprocal support is evident, for example, in healing circles which include spiritual traditions of specific Indigenous nations. Particularly, by allowing participants (i.e., incarcerated impacted individuals, families, disputants, and Elders) to express themselves, discuss personal healing journeys, and offer ongoing advice, healing circles strongly incorporate community participation

to ensure that all individuals involved in the reintegration process have the opportunity to speak and be heard (Chartrand & Horn, 2016). The objective of healing circles, therefore, is to bring newly released Indigenous individuals back to their community to close their history of conflict and move forward in meaningful reunification (Tompson et al., 2011).

Healing circles, however, are not the only manifestation of how reintegration takes place in ways that lean into notions of kinship. Reintegration is also often characterized by smaller, more intimate acts, in which Indigenous women are provided support and guidance from service providers. This includes, but is not limited to, shelter placements to meet immediate needs, childcare to participate in programming, as well as employment opportunities to establish a stable income (Tubex et al., 2021). Unlike Western, compartmentalized approaches to service delivery, Indigenous peoples view service delivery as an expression of care, commitment, and responsibility to community members. As highlighted by Anderson and Ball (2020), kinship care was systematically eradicated during colonialism as a strategy to control and overtake Indigenous peoples. Despite the devastating impacts of this practice, Indigenous peoples remain committed to maintaining a reciprocal community that sustains collective well-being (Little Bear, 2000). Through this obligation, Indigenous communities have mobilized various forms of service delivery to enact kinship practices that promote care, love, and support (Burke, 2023). This is evident in the space of reintegration, as Indigenous communities have shifted this carceral stage from being a return to the community towards an embodiment of relatedness. Stated differently, kinship, through its various forms, remains a core feature of the Indigenous community's understandings of reintegration and its purpose. This derives from the standpoint that the customs, values, and beliefs within Indigenous service delivery models are forms of empowerment that support the unity of Indigenous peoples while also facilitating agency to

improve their self-determination (Harfield et al., 2018). With this view in mind, reintegration has become increasingly marked by service delivery rooted in Indigenous perspectives, which sees such services as a modern expression of kinship obligations. Embedded within reintegration service delivery are mentorship-based relationships that strive to provide a safe space to practice self-reflection, power sharing and interconnectedness (Kovach, 2010). By providing psychosocial support through emotional connection, friendship and counselling, mentorships help individuals confront challenges including isolation, cultural disconnection, and a sense of not belonging, commonly experienced during reintegration (Hanham, 2025). Mentor-based relationships also offer instrumental support, wherein Indigenous individuals are given accessible networks and services to rely on when transitioning into difficult environments such as post-carcer life (Hanham, 2025). Through these practices, mentor-based relationships in the reintegration space support Indigenous self-determination by increasing individuals' ability to exhibit control over their lives in accordance with their cultural, social and economic needs (Mashford-Pringle, 2017).

While reintegration itself is a feature of control in the field of criminal justice, it is essential to acknowledge that Indigenous communities continue to strive for a level of autonomy and influence in this space. Any form of reintegration programming that supports Indigenous peoples' transition back into their community can therefore be interpreted as an expression of Indigenous governance or political power rooted in their ongoing nationhood and ongoing sense of obligation to community members. Reintegration, in this context, ultimately becomes a space that supports Indigenous resurgence. As resurgence is a process of reclaiming Indigenous ways of being, reintegration allows Indigenous people to restore what was stolen/suppressed through the correctional system. In terms of identity, reintegration and the tendency to find expressions of

communal support, provide opportunities to embody relational understandings of being through kinship, spirituality, and cultural practices. It is through this return to cultural traditions, practices, and values that Indigenous peoples can engage in political, social, and cultural resistance against settler carceral control. This is influential in relation to identity, as resurgence allows Indigenous peoples to push back against settler colonial imposed identities and stigmas that were constructed through incarceration, and therefore return to a culturally relevant sense of being/self.

### **Conclusion – The Contested Space of Reintegration**

Incorporating settler colonial theory into a critical conversation with theories of resurgence, this chapter provided an overview of how the reintegration space is conceptualized. Settler colonial theory approaches reintegration as a feature of settler colonial governing logic, aimed at reinforcing the inequality, state control and domination of Indigenous people. Relying on carceral geography and carceral citizenship literature, this perspective highlights the eliminatory logic underpinning reintegration. In contrast, Indigenous people imagine reintegration as a space marked by community reunification, mutual support and opportunities for engaging in resurgence. Through understandings of kinship and service delivery, reintegration is theorized as an inclusionary environment that facilitates self-determination and sense of belonging. As such, there is no universal definition of the purpose or impact of reintegration in Indigenous communities. By engaging these theories and literatures together, I am therefore informed and justified in exploring reintegration in a manner that appreciates its complex nature. That is, analyzing and writing about this space in a way that recognizes both expressions of carceral control *and* resurgence. Ultimately, this theoretical framework enables a

critical examination of where these two forces meet and collide in Indigenous women's identity formation during reintegration.

## **METHODOLOGY**

In this chapter, I describe the methodology I adopted in this study to describe and analyze the post-carcer experiences of Indigenous women as they enter the space of community reintegration. Broadly speaking, my methodology can be described as decolonizing, in that I critically assess, review, and describe reintegration as a highly regulated carceral space based on a series of publicly available data sets (Stevens-Uninsky et al., 2025). In the context of criminal justice and criminology, decolonizing methodologies have been associated with critical assessments that challenge the settler criminal justice system (Cunneen & Tauri, 2016). With this in mind, while my project critically assesses the space of reintegration through the lens of carceral geography, I also highlight and emphasize instances of resurgence, community, and kinship. This more nuanced position towards reintegration reflects a growing scholarly appreciation for expressions and instances of Indigenous resistance and resurgence in the face of settler colonial oppression (Coulthard 2014).

This chapter begins with a conversation on my positionality and its impact on how the data was viewed and interpreted. Next, I discuss the motivations for my study and outline my decolonial research goals. Following this discussion, I highlight the decolonial research paradigms that informed my approach to data analysis. This chapter then summarizes the research methods (i.e., data collection, sampling, coding) that guided this study's ability to examine both settler colonial *and* kinship relations in the space of reintegration. Lastly, I provide an overview of the methods that informed how Indigenous women's experiences were (re)analyzed and (re)assessed in order to (re)conceptualize the space of reintegration. Overall, this chapter provides an overview of who I am, why I engaged in this research, my research methods, and the ambitions I hold for my study's impact.

## **Background and Situating My Positionality**

At the outset of this chapter, it is imperative to acknowledge my status as a researcher to contextualize how my decision-making and assumptions towards the data may have been impacted during this research. As Gurr et al. (2024) suggest, positionality contextualizes how a researcher discerns their research issue, participants, design, context, as well as the research process overall. Positionality, therefore, includes statements on how past experiences, as well as interactions with participants and settings, can shape interpretations within the research process (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). When completing my project, recognizing my positionality remained integral to maintaining ethical research practices. I hold the perspective that in order to be ethical, researchers must take the role of the ‘Other’. Subsequently, I considered what it would feel like if a researcher with no connection to my lived experiences interpreted my history. These thoughts were central to my project as I consistently reflected on how Indigenous women could feel anger, sadness, or shame with my interpretations of their experiences. In doing so, I recognized the role of subjectivity in my research to critically understand how my identity might not accurately reflect the lived reality of the Indigenous women who appeared in the data.

To begin, I am a non-Indigenous woman. As a result, there were instances when I could have inadvertently prioritized Western, mainstream, or classical liberal conceptualizations of the autonomous self. As a settler, it was oftentimes difficult to understand the distinct cultural practices, beliefs, and overall experiences of Indigenous women. I faced difficulty in fully grasping why the relational identities of Indigenous women are so crucial to their livelihoods, and the significance of Indigenous culture as a form of resistance to settler control. Central to this difficulty was my position as a non-Indigenous researcher, which generated concerns that I inadvertently engaged in settler colonial practices during my data collection and analysis. This

included questions about potentially cherry-picking data that supported my personal beliefs, exercising my voice at inappropriate times, and engaging in a culturally insensitive analysis. Collectively, I experienced internal conflict over the course of my project regarding my legitimacy and capacity to interpret Indigenous women's community reunification experiences as a non-Indigenous person.

In addition to cultural barriers, I am also a non-incarcerated impacted individual, which prevented me from fully understanding the carceral state's impact on individuals, let alone those who are members of marginalized populations. Due to this, and also my personal beliefs on the value of prison abolition, I initially felt unable to think about incarceration outside of abolitionism's critical and rigid framing of incarceration as *only* being a negative experience. Consequently, this created difficulties during my data analysis, as I could not always hold space for the possibility that an Indigenous woman's carceral experience could have positive impacts on their life—or at least, that they could find positive meaning in their experience. Central to this was reconsidering my position about the unitary and unchallenged power of the carceral state, and instead, prioritizing and recognizing that Indigenous women hold agency and the ability to have positive experiences themselves despite facing the ongoing pains of incarceration and/or reintegration. In doing so, I actively reflected on how Indigenous women have the ability to make the best of a bad situation, including forming critically important relationships with each other and with service agencies, which collectively have a beneficial impact on their wellbeing and identity transformation during reintegration. Altogether, as I critically reviewed my own status as a non-incarcerated person, I was pushed to reconsider the influence of my ideals and their role in shaping my research.

However, as a woman of colour, I share similar experiences of social racialization and oppression. In this way, I was able to relate, to a degree, to the words, stories, and narratives of the Indigenous women in the data I collected. To clarify, while I have not had my identity stripped away from me by the state, as a second-generation Canadian, I understand how a strong community and reconnection to one's culture can be significant in one's identity formation in a predominantly white settler society. Therefore, I used this connection as an internal guide to remind me how identity, culture, community, and kinship are interconnected and can be vital for Indigenous women in Canada. Similarly, I recognized the influence of my critical academic knowledge and training in blurring my ability to see differing worldviews regarding the impacts of incarceration and reintegration. Through this process, I was able to discern and, ultimately, appreciate how cultural programming and reform efforts can be pathways to the long-term goal of carceral abolition. Although my lived experiences may not be perfectly aligned with Indigenous women, I nonetheless understand how my intersectional and distinct experiences and knowledges align, and at times, overlap, with those of Indigenous women. This constant self-reflection was integral to my project, as it improved my ability to gain different perspectives when engaging in both a critical and interpretive analysis.

### **Motivations for the Research**

#### *Engaging with Criminological Knowledge Production*

Throughout this project, I was guided by the perspective that research is embedded in wider political relations. Further, I believe social science research is inherently political, as it can be a mechanism to control society and become a tool used to maintain specific social structures, power dynamics, and relationships in society. In the context of my thesis, I recognized that some social science research, as well as criminological research, has become a tool used to confine formerly incarcerated Indigenous women to a specific marginalized identity and to reduce their

agency. As Felices-Luna (2010) states, criminology has become a tool for the state's normalizing carceral project. Through this lens, the discipline of criminology has faced criticism for serving state interests by creating mechanisms of social control, legitimizing crime control strategies, and maintaining the status quo of institutional power (Lynch, 2000). Ultimately, criminology has implications for the lived experiences of certain individuals due to its maintenance of the political enterprise of inclusion/exclusion (Hudson, 2000). This is reflective in the construction of theoretical and conceptual binaries, including offender/victim, immoral/moral, and crime/criminal, which have assigned specific individuals to a social category deemed deserving or undeserving of negative treatment (Ruggiero & Welch, 2009). The impact of the discipline's practice of *doing* criminology in this manner has directly affected Indigenous people throughout its existence. As Cunneen and Tauri argue (2016), positivist criminological research tends to be used by the state and its carceral institutions to better control incarcerated Indigenous populations. Relying on empirical validation, individual pathology and the erasure of Indigenous epistemologies, the criminological enterprise has often reduced Indigenous communities to a dysfunctional group that can be 'amended' through state control and punishment (Cunneen & Tauri, 2016).

With this knowledge, I hold the perspective that social science is not value free or objective but rather has the capacity to actively support oppressive social-political structures. Therefore, it is imperative to acknowledge the historical and cultural context of knowledge production, particularly within the discipline of criminology, when engaging in a social critique of reality. This position is reinforced by the fact that social science remains a part of the colonizing process of Indigenous peoples. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) notes, 'research' is inherently connected to European objectives of imperialism and colonialism. This is reflective in

the fact that Indigenous peoples have become constituted as objects of research, wherein their ways of knowing, being, and agency are exploited for settler gain (Coburn et al., 2013).

Objectification, paired with the pervasive Western desire for contemporary knowledge and discovery, has resulted in research being done *on* and not *for* the benefit of Indigenous communities (Smith, 2012). Consequently, this has led to practices of knowledge appropriation, wherein the extraction, exploitation, and ownership of Indigenous cultural knowledge have been used to advance the field of social science (Smith, 2012). Altogether, social science often operates as a (settler) colonial mechanism aimed at attaining the goals of Western academia.

### *Privileging the Voices of Formerly Incarcerated Indigenous Women*

I was motivated to produce a research project that minimizes and disrupts power hierarchies in scholarship as much as possible. I worked towards this objective by abandoning the idea of a hierarchy of credibility in my research. Specifically, I did not rely on the popular assumption that members of the highest group in social science (i.e., Western researchers) have the inherent right and power to define, organize, and articulate views of reality (Becker, 1967). In doing so, I resisted the notion that institutionalized expertise and legitimacy should be prioritized and valued over the voices of research communities. This pushback occurred through reconsidering the grounds for speaking and the construction of expertise in my research. It is evident that the basis of expertise provides the authority to speak in research. However, expertise has become institutionalized, which has undermined the value of experiential knowledge. In doing so, speaking for others has become normalized, thereby reinforcing hierarchies around knowledge production. To address this barrier, whenever possible, I rejected the common practice of relying on ‘experts’ and others with privilege to speak about, or for, marginalized

individuals and their communities (hooks, 1998). Particularly, I valued the lived experiences and, by extension, the voices of formerly incarcerated Indigenous women.

I achieved this by relying on data sources that predominantly featured formerly incarcerated Indigenous women who were sharing their reunification experiences— as opposed to privileging institutional voices, such as CSC staff. This stemmed from my belief that marginalized individuals should be provided the opportunity to name their history, shape their stories, and define their social reality. However, recognizing that the nature of my thesis was to share and (re)interpret the words of formerly incarcerated Indigenous women when they spoke of reintegration, I was cautious of my capacity to fully achieve this goal. To clarify, early into the data collection phase, I recognized and acknowledged that Indigenous women did not always use explicit language when communicating the impact of carceral control, kinship, or healing. Therefore, while I ‘spoke’ for Indigenous women at certain points in my analysis, I did so in an ethical way that sought to find new or different meanings that were enmeshed ‘implicitly’ or ‘under the surface’ in the words they shared. In doing so, I acted as a facilitator of knowledge, committed to presenting and building new forms of truth and knowledge. Stated differently, although I occasionally reframed Indigenous women’s narratives, I actively engaged in an analysis that was respectful, representative, and beneficial for Indigenous women (Grbich, 2004). Overall, this project was guided by the view that participants with lived experiences are experts in their own social reality.

By privileging Indigenous women’s voices, this research project was motivated by a desire to highlight the resilience of Indigenous women, which is often obscured by research that overemphasizes their oppression in settler society. In other words, social science research tends to focus more on the inequality enacted against and experienced by Indigenous women, thereby

creating a research echo chamber. This approach fails to recognize the forms of resistance and agency that Indigenous women display, which they continue to express within Canadian carceral settings. I am, therefore, invested in showcasing the resilience of Indigenous women to demystify scholarly understandings of their life experiences, especially in relation to the correctional system. While this incentive carries academic significance by addressing scholarly gaps in social science knowledge, this project is also informed by socio-political motivations. It is clear that Indigenous women's voices have historically been and continue to be overshadowed by varying social and political systems that have pushed their voices to the periphery of society. This has been intentional, as it has given the settler state opportunities to impose stereotypes and ideologies that fit its objective of controlling Indigenous communities. As a result, Indigenous women have often been constricted to identity labels such as 'criminal', 'lazy', or 'sexually deviant'. Although these labels are not indicative of Indigenous women's character, they have gained social currency due to the influence of settler society's social and cultural discourses about Indigenous peoples. Recognizing how such discourses (re)produce the social world and social beings, my project was motivated to privilege Indigenous women and emphasize their stories in their own words. By presenting the words and narratives of Indigenous women found in diverse archival data sources, I sought to amplify their voices to promote accurate self-representation that would undermine oppressive social stigmas, structures, and processes.

#### *Making Space for the Voices of Community Service Workers*

While this thesis prioritized the inclusion and voices of formerly incarcerated Indigenous women, it also drew on narratives from community service workers with expertise in reintegration. Community service workers were included due to their long histories of working with formerly incarcerated Indigenous women, which positioned them to speak on women's

identity transformation process. However, these commentaries were used to complement Indigenous women's voices, by providing additional clarity on how aspects of reintegration unfold within broader systemic contexts. In other words, community service workers helped to situate women's reintegration experiences, as well as their identity transformation, within wider socio-political relations— something that was not always explicitly highlighted by Indigenous women themselves. For example, Indigenous women did not always directly refer to the expressions of carceral geography embedded in their reintegration experiences, and its negative impact on their identity. Community service workers therefore acted as a bridge, showcasing how women's experiences with identity transformation often reflected structural conditions that served settler colonial interests. In this way, the voices of community service workers provided further insight into the complex realms of reintegration, thereby providing a more complete picture of the experiences referenced by Indigenous women themselves. Overall, while formerly incarcerated Indigenous women's voices remained at the forefront of this thesis, the voices and narratives of community service workers provided a secondary layer that contextualized and supported the experiences of Indigenous women.

### *Decolonizing Methodologies*

Decolonization can be understood as a long-term process that actively works to dismantle Eurocentric knowledges, the production of said knowledges, and internalized colonized values/beliefs within both colonized and colonizing populations, while advancing Indigenous self-determination and/or sovereignty (Held, 2019). While generally considered a political project, academia has become a contemporary space that can facilitate and support decolonization by decolonizing the production of knowledge. While academia has been, and continues to be, a colonial tool for institutionalizing and legitimizing the ideologies of a

dominant group, it also has the power to challenge Eurocentric discourses that uphold hegemonic socio-political structures (Held, 2019). With this in mind, decolonial research stems from the perspective that research is not a neutral activity that creates unbiased knowledge, but rather, that it can reproduce colonial injustice (Moosavi, 2025). As a result, decolonial research leans into this political understanding of research by engaging in political and disruptive research. Central to this approach is challenging how Eurocentric research methods have tended to undermine local knowledge/experiences of marginalized groups (Keikelame & Swartz, 2019). Decolonizing traditional research methodologies occurs through inserting Indigenous principles into research practices that support Indigenous peoples' rights and sovereignty (Smith, 2012). To decolonize methodologies, therefore, means placing power within the Indigenous community and supporting their goal of self-determination.

Overall, as my research sought to advocate for an equitable social world for Indigenous communities, a decolonial methodology was beneficial for achieving my research intentions. Central to my study was producing a body of scholarship that highlighted the inherent tension between settler colonialism and resurgence in the carceral context. The overarching goal of my research, therefore, was to highlight the agency of Indigenous women in my study— a guiding principle of decolonial research. I aimed to generate knowledge that extends beyond the academic sphere to spread broader social awareness of the inequality experienced by formerly incarcerated Indigenous women (Ezzy, 2002). I achieved this through a non-jargoned writing style for my results and their significance, which could be easily understood by a variety of social actors. My intention was to produce a counter-history that challenged official state narratives regarding the function of the correctional system and its 'neutral' treatment of Indigenous women. However, I strived for my research to not only educate broader society on

the lived experiences of formerly incarcerated Indigenous women, but to also showcase how Indigenous women engage in resistance to settler colonial structures such as the carceral state and its carceral geographies in the context of reintegration. Stated differently, I was motivated to create a project that would not simply highlight the harms of incarceration and reintegration on Indigenous women. I also wanted to demonstrate how Indigenous women undermine, disrupt, and bring their own resurgent intentions and motivations as they navigate their reintegration back into their community. This balance was integral to my project, as I did not want to reinforce the binary (i.e., positive/negative) associated with conceptualizations of the carceral state. With these objectives in mind, I intend to give back to the Indigenous community by creating a research project that is decolonizing in nature. Given the history of extractivism in all research on Indigenous peoples, including social science research, I was guided by the principle that my research project should support the self-determination of Indigenous communities.

### **Adopting Decolonizing Research Paradigms into my Project**

By combining critical/(re)interpretive research paradigms within decolonizing methodologies, this thesis rejects the idea that knowledge can and should only be produced in one scientific/objective way. Instead, I restructure Western research paradigms to better fit with a decolonizing model of research. My thesis identified and analyzed social, political, and legal ruling relations that reproduce settler colonial relations. In particular, I argued throughout this thesis that reintegration can be understood through the lenses of ‘carceral geography’ and ‘carceral citizenship’ to broadly demonstrate that Canada’s criminal justice system is a settler colonial institution. In doing so, I adopted a critical research paradigm, focusing on ruling relations, systems of power, and hidden ideologies in the context of reintegration. This reflects more traditional critical research, which tends to focus on the ‘why’ and ‘how’ of social

phenomena to critique and disapprove of manifestations of inequality and oppression that unfold within society (Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021).

However, being critical of socio-political relations does not represent the only way to adopt a decolonizing methodology. As Moosavi (2025) highlights, decolonial research significantly overlaps with critical research methodologies due to their shared value of an emancipatory political agenda. However, decolonizing approaches are not only concerned with describing/critiquing settler colonial power relations— rather, they also seek to undo them (Denscombe, 2025). In this way, decolonial research expands upon traditional critical research paradigms, which are more analytical and descriptive, by using knowledge as a vehicle for social change. My thesis adopts this approach as it moves beyond critiquing social inequality and settler colonial relations towards seeking to rebuild community-centred and culturally relevant practices by emphasizing contemporary Indigenous relationalities, which will likely become the building blocks for self-determining Indigenous societies in the future. Stated differently, I highlighted the voices of Indigenous women and the kinship relationships they formed during reintegration, since these relationships are critical to rebuilding sovereign and self-determining Indigenous societies in Canada.

### *The Decolonial Strength of Interpretivism*

I integrated an interpretative research paradigm to analyze the space of reintegration and how Indigenous women experience reintegration. Drawing on Wiesner (2022), interpretivism's strength lies in its ability to understand subjective realities, experiences, and actions from the perspective of participants. Hence, this paradigm focuses on the 'what' by (re)interpreting social conditions and relations by giving voice to the 'researched'. This sort of interpretative paradigm aligns with decolonial research practices, as it provides a strong foundation for challenging the

hegemony of Western methodology and supports the authentic portrayal of Indigenous peoples in their own voices (Denscombe, 2025). This is achieved by allowing participants to represent themselves according to their own social reality, even if this representation does not align with academic conventions and parameters (Moosavi, 2025). A decolonial (re)interpretive research paradigm, therefore, includes theoretical explanations and methodological approaches that embrace other(ed) ways of knowing (Keikelame & Swartz, 2019). In the context of my thesis, this unfolded by recognizing and valorizing decolonial values when (re)interpreting reintegration, such as respect for self-determination, resilience to the onslaught of ongoing colonialism, and displays of resistance towards settler colonial ruling relations (Held, 2019). As a result, my research is decolonizing, relevant, and supportive under this decolonial paradigm approach, as it was driven by cultural values and worldviews that are relevant to the lived experiences of Indigenous women. Collectively, I prioritized Indigenous perspectives and voices to (re)interpret their resistance, resilience, and kinship in the face of settler colonial attempts of control – which is an often-marginalized perspective when assessing their experience with reintegration.

### *Decolonial Research Commitments*

In order to understand Indigenous women's identity transformation during reintegration, I adopted a decolonial approach—combining critical and interpretative approaches—when assessing Indigenous lived experiences, narratives, and social realities. By doing so, my thesis shifted from viewing the end goal of my research as an outcome with definite answers, towards recognizing the equal significance of raising questions and promoting deep introspection in research to establish decolonized unknowns. In other words, I recognized and reflected on the significance of the resilience that Indigenous women exhibit within the space of reintegration.

Lastly, my thesis was intended not only with exemplifying alternative ways of producing knowledge (i.e., decolonial research methods), but also to ensure that my analysis was advantageous to those involved through conscientization, or ‘giving voice’ to the ‘Other’. As a result, I intend for my research findings to be only used for the benefit of formerly incarcerated Indigenous women and not commodified or exploited for my benefit as a researcher. Upon completion of my thesis, I plan to circulate my findings with non-profit organizations across Toronto and Ottawa that support Indigenous women as they navigate post-carcerall life. More specifically, I will be creating a single-page summary of my research findings that will include their significance and suggestions to be applied practically. My intention in this practice is to ensure that my research is accessible and can serve as a beneficial resource for Indigenous women as they navigate the whirlwind of post-carcerall life.

## **Research Methods**

### *Overview*

This research study applied a qualitative analysis to effectively understand the identity transformation Indigenous women experience during post-carcerall reintegration. Using secondary data, such as government reports, national inquiries, podcasts, journals, and community projects, I engaged in an exploratory study of formerly incarcerated Indigenous women to identify and explain the inherent tension between settler carcerall control and resurgence within the space of reintegration. Table 1 presents a detailed summary of the data sets used in this project. I conducted a secondary data analysis due to time constraints, participant access, and ethical implications in my project. First, the strict timeline of this project did not provide an opportunity to pursue interviews or conduct surveys with formerly incarcerated Indigenous women. Furthermore, as my population of interest is generally hard to reach, secondary data provided a feasible opportunity to examine data that I would otherwise acquire

through observations, interviews, or open-ended surveys. Lastly, there were ethical considerations, such as retraumatizing participants, reinforcing settler colonial exploitation, or perpetuating harm. These collectively informed my use of secondary data in this study in order to reduce Indigenous women's vulnerability through the research process itself. After data collection, I completed a discourse analysis and (re)interpretation process to analyze the language of formerly incarcerated Indigenous women and understand the meanings they attach to the space of reintegration. While thematic analysis – the identification, organization and analysis of themes in a data set – could have been utilized in this study, it was ultimately excluded due to its inability to allow researchers to infer about the language used by individuals (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This is attributed to its focus on the content, rather than the symbolism of language (Nowell et al., 2017). Likewise, content analysis— the identification of words, concepts, and themes to identify key trends— was omitted as an analysis method (Graneheim et al., 2017). This was due to the fact that content analysis often relies on the reductive categorization of experiences, thereby preventing a holistic and interpretive understanding of interviewees' language (Graneheim et al., 2017). Discourse analysis, therefore, was the most applicable research analysis method for my study as I was concerned with understanding how language reflects and shapes various social, political and cultural practices/interactions in the context of the carceral state (Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007). As a result, this approach allowed me to examine how formerly incarcerated Indigenous women's patterns of speaking and discursive logics reflect and demonstrate negotiations of power and authority in the social world (Cheek, 2004).

Table 1: Summary of Data Sources

| Data Source                                                                  | Individual Submission                                                                                                                                                    | Format of Data                      | Date Published          | Area of Focus                                                                              |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Releasing Hope: Stories of Transition from Prison to Community</b>        | Lora ‘Koala’ Kwandiben’s Report<br>Amber Christie’s Report<br>Chas Coutlee’s Report<br>Odessa Marchand’s Report<br>Aboriginal Healing Outside the Gates Research Project | Anthology                           | 11/25/2019              | Prison experiences and reintegration                                                       |
| <b>National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls</b> | Truth Gathering Process: Claudine (Cee Jai) & Rhoda Julian                                                                                                               | Government Report                   | 12/05/2017              | Prison experiences and reintegration                                                       |
|                                                                              | Institutional & Expert/Knowledge-Keeper Hearings: Cassandra Churcher, Savannah Gentile, Diane Sere & Patrica Tate                                                        | Government Report                   | 09/18/2018              | Prison experiences and reintegration                                                       |
|                                                                              | Chapter 8: Deeper Dive – Criminalizing and Incarcerating Indigenous Women                                                                                                | Government Report                   | 06/3/2019               | Prison experiences and reintegration                                                       |
| <b>Standing Committee on the Status of Women</b>                             | FEWO-82<br>FEWO-83<br>FEWO-84<br>FEWO-85<br>FEWO-86<br>FEWO-87<br>FEWO-88<br>FEWO-89                                                                                     | House of Commons Committee Meetings | 12/05/2017 – 02/13/2018 | Prison experiences, the role of community organizations during re-entry, and reintegration |
| <b>Correctional Service Canada Research Report</b>                           | A Qualitative Study of Experiences at Women’s Healing Lodges                                                                                                             | Government Report                   | 05/2023                 | Preparation for reintegration, the role of community during re-entry                       |
| <b>Walking the Red Path Photobook: Braiding Inner</b>                        | Resiliency and Freedom by Ulluria                                                                                                                                        | Community Project                   | 3/5/2025                | Reintegration experience                                                                   |
|                                                                              | Can You Relate? By Bubbles                                                                                                                                               |                                     |                         |                                                                                            |

|                                                      |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |                       |                                                    |                                                                                                     |
|------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Guidance:<br/>Reclaim,<br/>Embrace,<br/>Dream</b> | It's Never Too Late by<br>Pebbles<br><br>My Healing Journey:<br>Rychele                                                                                                                                                                                                        |                       |                                                    |                                                                                                     |
| <b>Journal of<br/>Prisoners on<br/>Prison</b>        | This is Who I Am:<br>Aboriginal Women's<br>Healing from<br>Criminalization and<br>Problematic Drug Use<br><br>Anti-Colonial Abolition:<br>International Context<br><br>The Heartwork in Walls to<br>Bridges: A Conversation on<br>Anti-Colonial Education<br>and Incarceration | Non-profit<br>journal | 08/01/2011<br><br><br>04/03/2022<br><br>05/10/2023 | Reintegration<br>experience<br><br>Prison experience<br><br>Prison experiences<br>and reintegration |
| <b>Life Jolt</b>                                     | Inside and Indigenous                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | Podcast               | 09/13/2021                                         | Prison experiences<br>and reintegration                                                             |
| <b>Prison<br/>Inside/Out</b>                         | Cultural Reconnection in<br>Indigenous Corrections: Part<br>2                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | Podcast               | 07/07/2025                                         | Prison experiences<br>and reintegration                                                             |
| <b>CBC Opinion<br/>Piece</b>                         | Restorative Justice Helped<br>Me Turn My Life Around –<br>and It Started With One<br>Drum                                                                                                                                                                                      | News<br>Article       | 11/30/2025                                         | Prison experiences<br>and reintegration                                                             |

### *Data Collection and Secondary Sources*

While I could not complete in-person research, I nonetheless wanted to engage in qualitative research methods to gain in-depth insight into the reintegration experiences of Indigenous women in relation to (re)learning about their identity. Secondary data, therefore, was a sufficient alternative in comparison to conducting interviews with Indigenous women. Understood as the use of pre-existing data, secondary data provides researchers the opportunity to explore and answer new research questions (Heaton, 2004). This form of data collection holds various advantages, such as saving time inducing sampling processes, researching hard to reach

populations, mitigating the arduous processes associated with research ethics boards, and reducing the likelihood of poor response rates (Kelly et al., 2024). For the purpose of my project, secondary data was useful as it amplified the voices of individuals whose ideas and lived experiences are often unheard due to political, social, or cultural circumstances (O'Reilly & Kiyimba, 2015). As this thesis strived to learn from formerly incarcerated Indigenous women regarding how their identity is transformed upon carceral release, secondary data allowed me to access the lived experiences, power, and social influences that collectively shaped women's understanding of reintegration. This was significantly beneficial, as Indigenous women are frequently under-recognized in social science research. Therefore, by using secondary data, I was able to bring women's thoughts and experiences—expressed in the form of diaries, podcasts, memoirs, or state documents—to the foreground of contemporary criminological research (Chatfield, 2020).

The secondary data for this project were collected by accessing publicly available archives (see Table 1) that included fully written transcripts or audio files from formerly incarcerated Indigenous women and staff (i.e., Elders and community workers) who have worked in the space of reintegration. Given the limited amount of existing data on my topic, my criteria for including sources remained significantly open. For instance, I did not confine my data to a specific population of Indigenous women (i.e., First Nations, Métis, or Inuit). Similarly, I did not have temporal restrictions on the periods in which my data was published. These decisions were again informed by the limited availability of applicable secondary data for my project. With this in mind, I did not exclude data from the Correctional Service of Canada in this project. Although a reliance on state created data is oftentimes— and rightfully so— critiqued for supporting state objectives, I adopted a nuanced position on its feasibility for my project. Stated differently, I

believed that the voices of incarcerated impacted Indigenous women, no matter where they came from, were an imperative strength for my analysis, as it provided me with a glimpse into the lived experiences of Indigenous women. However, I incorporated an exclusion criterion in my project to ensure my analysis was geographically accurate and ethically appropriate. For example, I excluded sources that were not based in the Canadian context. This decision was primarily based on the fact that I was only interested in understanding the identity transformation of Indigenous women who experienced carceral release in Canada and not internationally. This specific focus on Canada stemmed from the lack of research in the country, the state's prior and contemporary use of incarceration as a settler colonial tool, and ongoing forms of resurgence within Indigenous communities in the country. Furthermore, I did not incorporate data that could violate or ignore the informed consent of Indigenous women for the sharing of their stories. Put differently, I excluded data that was behind a paywall, given to me confidentially, or explicitly stated as not to be used for research/other purposes. These criteria were based on my ethical decision not to (re)produce harm through my research.

The sampling method for my project was purposive sampling. This method is most frequently used with hard-to-reach populations to support research that yields in-depth and rich understandings of a social phenomenon (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2025). Shifting away from random forms of sampling, purposive sampling involves selecting cases with specific characteristics to develop a relevant and contextualized understanding of an issue (Campbell et al., 2020). While simple random sampling could have increased representativeness in my project, as I previously mentioned, there is a low amount, and therefore a gap, of available data on formerly incarcerated Indigenous women's experiences in the Canadian context. Ultimately, it would be significantly difficult to ensure that a formerly incarcerated Indigenous woman from every Indigenous

community had an equal chance of being selected and analyzed in this study. Purposive sampling, therefore, allowed me to intentionally select cases that would provide multiple, relevant, and knowledgeable accounts regarding how Indigenous women's identities transform during their reintegration. In doing so, I was also able to mitigate my perpetuation of a pan-Indigenous research approach, which would ultimately disregard the diversity within Indigenous communities. Furthermore, I looked for stories of how Indigenous women experience both harm *and* kinship during their reintegration. In doing so, I was selective of the data for my thesis, as I was not only concerned with the manifestation of settler colonialism or resurgence, but rather, recognizing the tension between these two forces during reintegration. As a result, I intentionally selected cases that reflected these realities and did not focus on stories where other confounding factors had a clear impact during reintegration. Overall, as my study did not aim to generalize the identity transformation of all formerly incarcerated Indigenous women in Canada, purposive sampling was useful, as it allowed me to select specific cases that helped me meet my overarching research objective – that is, to (re)conceptualize the space of reintegration.

#### *My Process of Locating and Accessing the Data*

To obtain my data, I began with a broad search of Indigenous women's post-carceral release experiences on Google using the following keywords: 'Canada', 'identity', 'cultural practices', 'punishment', and 'kinship'. This search first led me to the Native Women's Association of Canada website, which included links to the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women Report and the Braiding Guidance Community Project. After this successful data collection, I continued my search and pivoted toward memoirs and anthologies available either online or in the University of Ottawa's library. This direction was inspired by my position that books provide authorship, agency, and empowerment to individuals when recounting their lived

experiences. In other words, I was more inclined towards memoirs and anthologies as I appreciated the control they provided women over their stories, the boundaries they created, and their reduced likelihood of perpetuating harm. As a result, I viewed books as a data source that not only provided me with rich data to analyze but also served the best interests of the Indigenous women whom my research depends on. Finally, I explored visual forms of secondary data, which led me to search for relevant podcasts. Podcasts were chosen, as they closely resembled the structure of open-ended interviews. This was beneficial for my project, as these sources included follow up questions, increased nuance, and longer sets of critical data that were otherwise missing from written documents or literature. Overall, data collection occurred for seven months from September 2025 to January 2026. During data collection, a working chart was created to report and update relevant information on the secondary data selected such as its location, date, demographic information of participants, and areas of focus. This documentation streamlined the organization of my collected data and served as a reference guide for my evolving sample size, study representativeness, and research journey. Once all data was compiled, I created separate folders for each source that included either its written text or audio converted transcripts. These folders were then uploaded to NVivo software for coding and subsequent data analysis.

## **Data Analysis**

### *Approach*

The method to analyze data for this thesis began with an inductive approach. As Cooper et al. (2015) state, inductive analysis starts with viewing the specifics of a data set with the intention of moving towards broader generalizations. I applied this bottom-up approach by first gathering my data, then identifying and analyzing data trends and concluding with a theorization of my findings. I initially approached my study with the objective of using my data to develop

theory, rather than applying a pre-existing theory to my data to better understand the social realm of reintegration. However, I later realized that this approach was not the best fit for my thesis, as I wanted to use settler colonialism and resurgence theories as frameworks to guide my conceptualizations of reintegration. Therefore, data was approached with abductive reasoning, which Timmermans and Tavory (2022) highlight as the welcoming of anomalies and unexpected findings within an analytical framework. Incorporating this perspective, I first created preliminary theoretical hunches from my research findings, which centered on settler carceral control and kinship-based resurgence. After this process, I consulted my data to determine whether Indigenous women's stories aligned with my preliminary explanations and the overarching theoretical literature. When gaps between my data and predictions emerged, I reflected on how current theoretical frameworks of either settler colonialism or kinship were limited in accounting for my empirical material. Throughout this process, I moved back and forth between my data and theory to develop the most logical and useful conceptualization of the reintegration space. In doing so, I was able to break theoretical ground to address or integrate new ways of thinking about reintegration and its impact on formerly incarcerated Indigenous women's identity.

#### *Finding Settler Colonial Relationships During Reintegration*

As this thesis sought to understand the tension within the space of reintegration, finding settler colonial relationships was integral to my methodology. To locate manifestations of settler colonialism in Indigenous women's experiences, I identified the following settler colonial logics and practices: carceral continuity; institutional disconnection; dispossession; familial breakdown; and the destruction of sense of self. These logics were selected as they represented fundamental settler colonial objectives, such as isolation, conformity, and erasure of Indigenous peoples.

Notably, the indicators selected were expansive to capture a range of experiences/emotions as Indigenous women did not always have the direct language to describe settler colonial relationships. A summary of each logic, as well as their indicators, is included in Table 2 below.

*Table 2: Operationalization of Settler Colonial Logics*

| Logic                               | Definition                                                                                                                                                           | Indicators                                                                                                                                                                                |
|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Carceral Continuity</b>          | Expression of carceral geography, wherein the conditions of imprisonment and carceral power continue to exist in the reintegration space (Hamlin, 2020; Quinn, 2023) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Control</li> <li>• Surveillance</li> <li>• Fear/ anxiety of state power</li> </ul>                                                               |
| <b>Institutional Disconnection</b>  | Lack of connection to formal social, political and economic institutions (Moran, 2014; Western et al., 2015)                                                         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Responsibilization</li> <li>• Discrimination</li> <li>• Vulnerability</li> <li>• Isolation</li> </ul>                                            |
| <b>Dispossession</b>                | Physical and spatial separation from land and community (Piccin, 2025)                                                                                               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Limited housing options</li> <li>• Homelessness</li> <li>• Release conditions that restrict mobility</li> </ul>                                  |
| <b>Familial Breakdown</b>           | Long or short-term rupture of a family structure and relationships (Stone et al., 2017)                                                                              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inability to regain child custody</li> <li>• Physical and long-term separation</li> <li>• Imposition of ‘ideal’ notions of motherhood</li> </ul> |
| <b>Destruction of Sense of Self</b> | Loss of culturally relevant ways of being, acting and connecting with community (Maier & Ricciardelli, 2022; Scott, 2010)                                            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stigma</li> <li>• Self-blame</li> <li>• Pressure to achieve Western version of rehabilitation</li> </ul>                                         |

### *Finding Kinship During Reintegration*

In addition to finding settler colonial relationships in Indigenous women’s experiences, locating kinship was pivotal to exemplifying the antagonistic nature of reintegration. This was

achieved by categorizing kinship under four models to encapsulate the broad range of relationships within Indigenous communities. The intention of this approach was to ensure—to the best of my ability—that the language Indigenous women used when recounting their experience with reintegration could fit under either of these broad models. A summary of the operationalization of each expression of kinship is noted below in Table 3.

*Table 3: Operationalization of Kinship Networks*

| Kinship Form           | Definition                                                                                                               |
|------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Blood</b>           | (Re)connection with one’s biological family and nation (Beaufils, 2023)                                                  |
| <b>Chosen/adoptive</b> | Establishment of new relationships found via service delivery, in peer relationships or community members (Yazzie, 2023) |
| <b>Cultural</b>        | Relationships formed through cultural practices that promote belonging (Jacob et al., 2025)                              |
| <b>Land based</b>      | (Re)connection with ancestral lands, animals, plants or any additional form of nature (Gauthier et al., 2025)            |

While these operationalized definitions provided a baseline for locating kinship, I identified kinship as any relationship in which Indigenous women give or receive love and care. This approach was selected since kinship is a broad social concept that extends across all aspects of Indigenous being (Innes, 2013) and, as a result, cannot be confined to a single definition. Therefore, I wanted to ensure that Indigenous women’s experiences were not confined solely to these models, as they only served as a starting point for me to identify how their relationships could be initially conceptualized.

### *Coding*

Data was coded in this thesis through a combination of in vivo, action coding and open coding methods. In vivo coding refers to the use of exact words/phrases, such as action-oriented verbs, nouns with impact or distinct metaphors to create codes (Saldaña, 2013). In addition, action coding occurs when a movement, change, or dynamic account of events is recorded to understand a participant's process (Mezmir, 2020). Furthermore, open coding was incorporated to connect smaller codes to broader concepts that would later serve as building blocks for analysis (Qureshi & Ünlü, 2020). Key to my coding structure was the application of heterogeneity, in which I incorporated evidence of counterexamples to dominant narratives to prevent cherry-picking of data and thereby critically enrich my arguments (Small & Calarco, 2022). Data was coded using NVivo, which allowed me to organize a codebook comprised of main and subcodes. When coding, I used the listening guide strategy, which Maxwell and Miller (2010) describe as the reading/listening of data several times to identify new information with each reading. After this process, I created annotations on documents to capture the preliminary thoughts and emerging discourses I recognized (Smith, 2007). By combining these coding methods, I identified common words across Indigenous women's experiences, recognized prominent discourses, and conceptualized working frameworks to apply to the space of reintegration.

### *Discourses*

Upon completing coding, I categorized my data into discourses that captured the nexus of tensions that emerge and erupt during the reintegration process amongst formerly incarcerated Indigenous women. Discourses encapsulated broader systems of language that shaped how Indigenous women talked and understood the identity transformation process and reintegration more broadly (Calderón-Larrañaga et al., 2022). As a result, I identified how women's language

constructed and shaped identity, power dynamics and social reality during reintegration. This categorization process resulted in the identification of two major discourses in my data: carceral geography and resurgence. Under the discourse of carceral geography, women's experiences with a 'lack of support from the correctional/parole system', 'challenges of stability', 'weakening of relationality', and 'loss of identity' were included. This discourse represented the settler colonial continuum that is often expressed in reintegration and its negative impact on Indigenous women's identity. Conversely, women's experiences with 'love', 'care', 'community', 'healing', and 're-investing in Indigenous ways of being' were incorporated under the discourse of resurgence. This discourse demonstrated the agency and resurgence practices that Indigenous women experienced during their reintegration. I explored these two broad discourses as this study was not focused only on showing the oppressive aspects of reintegration but also exploring the forms of resurgence and resistance Indigenous women engage in when confronting and navigating settler colonial carceral domination. In short, these discourses allowed me to explore how Indigenous women transform their identities as they navigate the tension between carceral geography and kinship-based relationships.

### *Reinterpreting the Data to Find Hidden Meanings*

Given that this thesis demonstrated the 'messiness' of reintegration, in which Indigenous women experienced numerous things, a key methodological approach was to reinterpret statements and narratives. To clarify, it is common for women in post-carceral environments to not be thinking of settler colonialism and/or kinship on a deeper level. However, while women did not always use a certain type of language when reflecting on their experiences, it does not mean that mechanisms of settler carceral control and relationship building were not occurring in the space of reintegration. For instance, the terms 'kinship', 'resurgence', 'elimination', and

‘carceral geography’ were not always explicitly stated in the data. Nonetheless, they were represented in the diverse experiences of Indigenous women. As a result, a part of my analysis stage was to develop a level of assessment where I found new meaning in their words, specifically words or ideas that women might not have even mentioned themselves. When engaging in this reinterpretation assessment process, I was guided by three main principles. First, I consulted pre-existing literature to determine whether my preliminary interpretations were contextually accurate. This occurred by comparing my analysis to theoretical frameworks, which served as a lens to move beyond a surface level, or even an inaccurate conceptualization of women’s narratives. Second, I engaged in triangulation to identify trends between women’s words and my interpretations. The intention of this practice was to cross reference my interpretations to assess whether they were representative of women’s experiences or if they were a significant outlier that required further reflection during my assessment process. Lastly, whenever I made an interpretation of a woman’s experience in the space of reintegration, I always provided the direct quote I used under my analysis. This was to provide transparency to readers and demonstrate how I inferred either the manifestation of settler colonialism and/or kinship in my findings.

### *Discourse Analysis*

The method of analysis in this study was discourse analysis. Discourse analysis centres on the exploration of language not as a neutral medium, but as a mechanism through which individuals express power, dominance and resistance in social realities (Wagenaar, 2014). In doing so, this analysis method pushes researchers to reveal how practices, techniques and mechanisms become institutionalized over time to deconstruct hegemonic power (Van Hulst et al., 2025). However, discourse analysis is not only concerned with demonstrating how certain

discourses become dominant but also with exploring how alternative discourses contest domination and create new conceptualizations of social phenomena (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001). In other words, discourse analysis seeks to show not *what* individuals say, but *how* they speak about their experiences in the social world. Therefore, discourse analysis allows researchers to display how the ‘social’ is constantly being (re)produced through discourses.

In the context of my study, this was achieved by examining how inequality and power were embedded in the language Indigenous women used when recounting their reintegration experience. As previously stated, women did not always directly name expressions of carceral geography or resurgence when they recounted their reintegration. Therefore, my analysis centered on conceptualizing how women’s language reflected broader ideas of dominance/control *and* resistance/empowerment. To operationalize discourses, I identified specific linguistic markers that reflected the broader relations of settler colonialism, resistance, and power that shaped the identity transformation experience for Indigenous women. This involved finding patterns in the metaphors, key word choices, and framings Indigenous women used when reflecting on their identities during re-entry. For the discourse of settler colonialism, I isolated metaphors that emphasized bureaucratic traps, feeling watched, invisible power and dispossession. I also identified keywords such as ‘rules’, ‘compliance’, ‘monitoring’, ‘isolation’, ‘precarity’, and ‘punishment’. Finally, I explored how Indigenous women framed reintegration as a form of state control that reduced their opportunities for community-building and cultural revitalization. Central to operationalizing this discourse was examining how women’s language constructed reintegration as a space characterized by institutionalized mechanisms and practices that attempted to control, surveil or restrict their identities during reintegration.

Conversely, for the discourse of resistance and resurgence, I looked for metaphors that centred on feelings of rebirth, breaking cycles, and creating a cultural path. Furthermore, I looked for vocabulary that included ‘community’, ‘reclaiming’, ‘strength’, ‘healing’, and ‘culture’. Lastly, I identified how Indigenous women framed reintegration as an opportunity to re(connect) with kinship and engage in practices of cultural resurgence. Collectively, this discourse was operationalized by examining how women constructed alternative meanings of reintegration as a space where they resisted settler colonial attempts of domination, reclaimed agency, and culturally transformed their identities. Overall, through this process, I examined how women’s ways of speaking (i.e., restriction, openness, and overall rhetoric) represented larger discourses of both control *and* resistance. By focusing on *how* experiences were expressed by Indigenous women, rather than solely *what* was directly stated, my analysis examined how women’s language reflected the reproduction of power relations (i.e., settler colonialism) and their disruption (i.e., resistance and resurgence) in the space of reintegration. In return, this allowed me to conceptualize the identity transformation process in line with broader discourses expressed by Indigenous women.

### *Rigour*

Methodological rigour in qualitative scholarship centers on producing research that is viewed and understood as legitimate and worthy of attention (Nowell et al., 2017). As Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue, trustworthiness is the true measure of rigour in qualitative research, which can be fulfilled through the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Credibility addresses whether participants’ views and a researcher’s representations align (Tobin & Begley, 2004). To ensure my findings were true and, therefore, accurately represented Indigenous women’s experiences, I engaged in three main practices

throughout my data analysis. First, I provided direct quotations from Indigenous women whenever I interpreted their reintegration experience. The intention of this process was to provide transparency in the data and allow readers to see that I did not change the original meaning of women's words. Second, I repeatedly engaged with the data to review my findings and check if my previous assumptions needed to be updated to reflect Indigenous women's experiences accurately. Finally, I consistently debriefed with my supervisor to gain a second perspective on my findings to determine whether there were any key gaps between what women said and how I presented their words. I relied on my supervisor, as he is Mohawk and therefore had a better understanding of women's words within a broader cultural context.

Next, transferability focuses on the generalizability of a research inquiry to other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I achieved transferability by providing a detailed description of my research setting, allowing readers to determine whether the findings could apply to different social contexts. This was achieved through my inclusion and exclusion criteria, which highlighted that my sample remained open to diverse groups of Indigenous women; my use of secondary data; and my lack of temporal restrictions on my data along with the geographical boundaries of my research, as data outside the Canadian context was omitted. Moreover, dependability refers to the consistency of the research findings and ensures that the research process is traceable, logical and documented (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I addressed dependability by keeping an audit trail of my methodological decisions so that an outside reader could follow the research process. This trail included my decolonial research commitments, sampling method, process of locating and accessing my data, coding strategies, and analysis method. Lastly, confirmability concentrates on validating that researchers' interpretations and findings stem solely from the data (Tobin & Begley, 2004). To make certain that my results were driven by the

data rather than my personal biases or aspirations, I reflected on my positionality, consulted literature, and treated women as the primary source of knowledge in my thesis. For instance, I recognized my rigid beliefs of the negativity perpetuated by carceral spaces and how this influenced how I viewed Indigenous women's incarceration and subsequent reintegration experience. In doing so, I consistently acknowledged my hidden biases to prevent my personal views from skewing data. I also consulted literature on the carceral state and Indigenous resurgence to ensure that my assumptions were scholarly rather than personally informed by my ideologies and values. Overall, I actively treated Indigenous women as the primary source of knowledge and, therefore, as experts of social reality in my thesis to ensure my interpretations remained grounded in their experiences and not mine. Through varying methodological choices, this thesis meaningfully engaged with the criteria of rigorous qualitative scholarship.

## **Conclusion**

As reflected in the history of the discipline, traditional criminological research has often been conducted with a colonial gaze towards Indigenous communities. With this recognition in mind, my thesis pushes back against dominant research approaches to ensure that my scholarly conceptualizations are in the sole benefit of formerly incarcerated Indigenous women. Therefore, I adopted a critical, (re)interpretative decolonial research paradigm in this study to place power in the hands of Indigenous women and ensure an accurate representation of their experiences. Central to this methodological structure was the identification of both settler colonial and resurgent based relationships in the space of reintegration. Combining a variety of methodological approaches, this thesis aimed to move beyond a binary conceptualization of reintegration to instead highlight the contentious nature of this space and experience.

## **FINDINGS**

### **Introduction**

This chapter presents an overview of the findings from the research data. The data exemplified stories about how formerly incarcerated Indigenous women's identities transformed during their reintegration. The data drew from the stories and experiences of both community service workers and formerly incarcerated women. In this chapter, results are organized around two major discourses: (1) reintegration as a transcarceral space, and (2) reintegration as a space where kinship relationships unfold and manifest. The chapter begins with a presentation of reintegration as a form of carceral geography to demonstrate how carceral identities are attached to Indigenous women during reintegration. This discourse describes the structure, mechanisms, and outcomes embedded in reintegration and their impact on women's identity. At times, the first part of this chapter relies on the narratives of scholars and community service workers, with the latter often having direct contact with formerly incarcerated Indigenous women and thus were able to provide secondary commentary on their identity transformation. That said, the voices of formerly incarcerated Indigenous women are integral in the subsequent half of this chapter, as it shifts its focus towards sharing findings from the data that (re)frame reintegration as a site of kinship.

This second half of the chapter describes the kinship networks and relational supports that cultivated and encouraged Indigenous women to adopt culturally grounded identities. This section presents women's interaction and navigation of constraints in the space of reintegration to showcase how they express their agency. This discourse describes how Indigenous women's agency does not contend with being free from settler carceral control, but rather how it unfolds in highly mediated contexts of post-carceral life. Agency, therefore, is mobilized in this section to demonstrate how women make active choices and engage in localized acts that push back against

larger structural forces. Overall, the findings serve as a foundation for the final chapter of this thesis, where I analyze and discuss how Indigenous women's identities transform within the contradictory nexus between carceral continuity *and* kinship.

## **Reintegration as an Expression of Carceral Geography**

### **Reintegration as a Transcarceral Space (Structure)**

When recounting on their experiences after incarceration, the structure of reintegration and its impact on post-carceral life were prominent discourses mentioned by Indigenous women in the data that I examined. For Indigenous women, reintegration was described in various ways, including as a part of the *carceral continuum*, in that reintegration was structured in a way that heavily resembled and felt like incarceration. This was attributed to the nature of correctional programming and insufficient cultural support after release. Many Indigenous women mentioned that programs and post-carceral supports did not prepare and/or set them up with the knowledge, resources, and community supports they needed for a successful reintegration experience. As a result, Indigenous women frequently expressed frustration with the conditions of reintegration, which were seen as a contributor to the revolving door of incarceration. As a result, reintegration was regarded in the data as a transcarceral space that extended the power of the carceral state beyond the institutional walls of the prison.

### *Limitations of Correctional Programming in Carceral Release Planning*

Indigenous women's experiences *inside* prison, such as access to correctional programming, security over-classification, and placement in administrative segregation, had a significant impact on their post-carceral experience. Without adequate correctional programming, Indigenous women had less time to benefit from structured and gradual release plans that connected them with their community in a way that would aid in their successful

reintegration. Indeed, correctional programs for Indigenous women were characterized as lacking in availability throughout their incarceration. Community service workers, for example, highlighted that Indigenous women were far more likely than non-Indigenous women to not complete rehabilitation programs by the date of their parole eligibility due to strenuous approval processes that resulted in a lack of prompt access. This was further compounded by the fact that women serving short sentences often became eligible for release during their first year of their sentence. Programs were not available early enough in most Indigenous women's sentences, and as a result, programs didn't have meaningful impact on their reintegration. This was most relevant with healing lodges, which community service workers argued were largely inaccessible to Indigenous women due to stringent selection processes and limited capacity. Ultimately, the majority of Indigenous women experienced long wait times for entry and subsequently never accessed the reintegration benefits associated with healing lodges.

The inability to access programming was also credited to the over-reliance on administrative segregation for Indigenous women, as well as the over-classification in maximum security institutions. Collectively, they prevented Indigenous women from being able to access any programs during their sentences. Since placement in administrative segregation automatically prevented them from accessing correctional programming, this was argued to have detrimental impacts on their reintegration outcomes. Community service workers argued that due to isolation experienced during segregation, Indigenous women frequently struggled in their adjustment to the broader community after being confined to punitive conditions for months to years at a time. Moreover, the over-classification of Indigenous women to maximum security institutions often restricted their timely access to rehabilitative programming due to safety concerns for community service workers. This is again relevant to healing lodges, where

Indigenous women, due to their high classification, were not given priority for bed spaces due to their mental health needs and limited or under-resourced staff. As a result, Indigenous women were described to be:

Incentivized out of using the programs that are directed towards them, because the process to get into the programs can take so long that it's quicker for them to get parole if they don't opt for their culturally relevant programs (*V. Lomax, Standing Committee on the Status of Women, February 1, 2018, p. 7*).

Community service workers and Indigenous women highlighted that the inherent problem associated with limited access to programming was how this limited the independence and subsequent functionality of Indigenous women during their reintegration without the involvement of the carceral state. This was argued to put Indigenous women in a worse position for reintegration, as they were not provided with the rehabilitation, services, and skills to prevent their contact with the revolving door of incarceration.

The way that prison shapes the lives of women, by demonizing them and preventing them from fulfilling their potential, shows how diminished society becomes by imprisoning people (*Thalia Anthony, Journal of Prisoners on Prisons, 2022, p. 86*).

#### *Cultural Insensitivity of Programs*

When correctional programming was available to Indigenous women, programs were called out for failing to embrace the diversity of Indigenous cultures and, therefore, perpetuating cultural insensitivity. As Virginia Lomax, Legal Counsel for Native Women's Association of Canada, recounted:

An issue is that many of these programs present a homogenized view of Indigenous cultures, whereas the reality is that the Indigenous population of Canada is not a homogenous population. Many of these programs fail to recognize that teachings and practices that may be relevant in some communities are non-existent in others (*V. Lomax, Standing Committee on the Status of Women, February 1, 2018, p. 5*).

The uniform approach to correctional programs for Indigenous women was described as problematic due to its failure to address the holistic and interconnected nature of social and legal issues faced by Indigenous women. For example, while Okimaw Ochi Healing Lodge previously had a visiting Elder program with a diverse group of Elders that allowed Indigenous women around the country to experience their culture and engage in spiritual ceremonies, the program was scrapped despite most incarcerated Indigenous women being housed at Okimaw Ochi. As a result, Indigenous women who were non-First Nations (i.e., Inuit or Métis) were described as struggling during correctional programs since the ceremonies, Elders, or teachings were not reflective of their distinct heritage and lived experiences.

#### *Gendered Approach to Programming*

Correctional programs were also called out for their outdated gendered perspectives, which failed to teach Indigenous women the skills needed for a meaningful reintegration experience. Programs, which predominantly focused on sewing, cooking, and flower arranging, were described as diminishing Indigenous women's skills, as they failed to provide rehabilitation supports nor offered counselling services to address their mental health needs. Further, programs were described as not adequately preparing Indigenous women to support themselves and/or their families due to a lack of education attainment, employability skills, and treatment services to cope with life outside of prison. As Raji Mangat of the West Coast's Women's Legal Education and Action Fund recounted:

The programs that are available for women in terms of employment and education are really gendered and they really don't seem to speak to the kinds of skills that women are going to need in the economy when they get out of prison (*R. Mangat, Standing Committee on the Status of Women, December 12, 2017, p. 7.*)

In terms of carceral release planning, such programming was criticized for not adequately preparing Indigenous women for a successful reintegration. While community service workers

recognized that several correctional programs inside prison are targeted towards Indigenous women, there was a collective recognition amongst staff that many of these programs did not focus on reintegration into the community. This stance was affirmed by the belief that the correctional system and its focus on punishment, assimilation, and confinement has resulted in a serious lack of investment in addressing the root causes of criminalization, and as a result, effectively eroding rehabilitation and reintegration as its principal mandate. For Indigenous women, the structure of correctional programming reflected a larger systemic neglect within the criminal justice system. By not providing adequate reintegration programming and instead focusing on other kinds of programming, the state was viewed as exerting a covert form of control over Indigenous women. Many felt that the state's prison programming had its own vision of what reintegration would or should look like for women. This included reinforcing Western models of rehabilitation as the standard for how reintegration should be experienced. However, Indigenous women felt that such programming did not actually prepare them for reintegration. This stemmed from the belief that carceral programs did not prioritize healing and improving women's self-determination over their post-carceral lives – factors deemed crucial for a meaningful reintegration experience among Indigenous women. Ultimately, prison programming was seen as being more invested in continuing settler power as the state retained ownership over how reintegration would look, rather than representing the needs of Indigenous women. As Virginia Lomax stated:

Canada's colonial history has created a real climate of and culture of distrust, where Indigenous women see the justice system as not representing them. Therefore, many women in these programs feel that the cultural programming available in prisons represents another form of colonialism. That's because the programs themselves are largely developed, defined, and designed by the Canadian government (*V. Lomax, Standing Committee on the Status of Women, February 1, 2018, p. 5*).

### *Lack of cultural support during release*

In addition to inadequate correctional programming, community service workers and formerly incarcerated Indigenous women discussed the absence of culturally relevant supports during reintegration. Key to this discourse were operational issues with Section 84 of the Corrections and Conditional Release Act (CCRA). This section of the CCRA mentions that incarcerated individuals have the opportunity to serve their statutory release from prison in an Indigenous community or with the support of an Indigenous organization. Importantly, community members running the program are actively involved in Section 84 release planning by identifying and providing the support that formerly incarcerated individuals need and require. While appearing beneficial in theory, Section 84 has been underutilized. When reflecting on the lack of use of Section 84 for Indigenous women, Debra Parkes, Chair in Feminist Legal Studies at the University of British Columbia, stated:

There are a lot of good people doing this work. It's not that. It's just that the resources and focus are not really there on community release. It's always an afterthought to asking 'What is the risk? What is the community? What is the public safety issue?' (*D. Parkes, Standing Committee on the Status of Women, February 8, 2018, p. 14*).

Various community service members agreed with this sentiment, as attention was focused on CSC's enhanced focus on risk and security rather than the approval of a section 84 release plan. Particularly, emphasis was placed on incarceration, including maximum-security placements for Indigenous women, compared to resource allocation and funding for more creative and flexible Section 84 release plans. This was reaffirmed by Kathryn Ferreira, Director of Queen's Prison Law Clinic, who says:

Their [Indigenous women] release plans are not being investigated properly by Correctional Services if they wanted to access a Section 84 parole release. Risk and institutional progress are all factors in parole grants, and because of those circumstances, Indigenous women would have much lower opportunities for parole (*K. Ferreira,*

*Standing Committee on the Status of Women, February 8, 2018, p. 5).*

Due to an overreliance on public safety, Section 84 was described as a failed initiative, in that Indigenous women were not provided their legal entitlement to serve their parole in their communities. As a result, Indigenous women were described as being set up to fail in the community, as they were released without enough support from their time in prison. In other words, the correctional system as an institution was called out for not providing Indigenous women with the cultural resources needed to heal and move forward in their lives outside of the carceral context. As three formerly incarcerated First Nations women recounted, a lack of cultural support during release negatively shaped their navigation of life after prison:

They just threw me back to my community ... where my family were addicts ... with no support when I went back (*Anonymous woman, Missing & Murdered Indigenous Women & Girls Final Report, 2019, p. 642*).

I went to a non-Aboriginal half-way house, and there was very little support for me and my culture there. When I wanted help from the Aboriginal liaison person, I couldn't get a hold of him (*Odessa, Releasing Hope, 2019, p. 232*).

There are many treatment centers but not enough First Nations, Métis and Inuit centers which would allow many to heal in an environment that is natural for them. I would have loved to heal in my language, but it is what it is (*Ulluria, Walking the Red Path Photobook, 2025, p. 21*).

The lack of cultural support during re-entry was encapsulated by Teresa Edwards, member of the Board of Directors at the Indigenous Bar Association in Canada. She mentions:

We have stories of women who are given four bus tickets. They get on a bus, they take it as far as it will go, and they go and commit a crime so that they'll get back and have a place to live. There's no plan in place. We need to have those plans for women, with proper transitional supports and programs that support their physical and psychological well-being upon release (*T. Edwards, Standing Committee on the Status of Women, February 13, 2018, p. 13*).

### *Ongoing CSC Involvement During Reintegration*

Despite CSC's awareness of the importance of community ownership/overview during reintegration, the correctional system remained heavily involved in Indigenous women's reintegration experience. This stemmed from the state absolving itself of the responsibility to maintain cultural and community connections during reintegration. In doing so, CSC increased its ability to dictate how they would be involved in Indigenous women's reintegration experience. Therefore, while CSC was absent in providing adequate cultural supports during reintegration, they were nonetheless active in providing state-led services that they argued would be helpful for Indigenous women during re-entry. This was referenced by Anne Kelly, former Commissioner of CSC, who stated Aboriginal community officers were available during the release planning stage to support women who expressed an interest in returning to an Indigenous community. In addition, the former Commissioner referenced CSC's local-level initiatives to improve the reintegration outcomes of Indigenous women, including CORCAN initiatives that enhance their ability to earn a living wage upon release.

However, community service workers deemed this problematic, seeing CSC's involvement in the reintegration space as a continuation of institutional power. Specifically, criticism centred on the extension of the authority of the carceral state over the movement of Indigenous women *outside* of the formal space of prison. In other words, community service workers viewed CSC's control over reintegration as a tool that kept Indigenous women indirectly linked to the prison and its conditions. As Savannah Gentile, Director of Advocacy and Legal Issues with the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies, highlighted:

So, cutting ties with, you know, CSC, creating funding, there are all sorts of organizations out there, community-based organizations, that are just dying to do this work and are underfunded, and overworked, and working from the sides of their desks. And, they can't

do it the way they envision doing it, because they are handicapped by contracts with CSC that place conditions on them that they have to become the jailor. You know, that creates distrust, but that is social control (*S. Gentile, National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women & Girls, September 19, 2018, p. 288*).

Both the lack of culturally relevant programming and cultural support during release highlight severe issues in Indigenous women's ability to reintegrate into their communities. While these limitations may appear reflective of the correctional system's operational failures, the lack of willingness from the correctional system to prepare or set up Indigenous women for a successful reintegration experience stems from the carceral state's transcarceral intentions. While CSC may argue that it does not intend to exert formal carceral control once women leave prison, their policies and approaches to reintegration nonetheless create a transcarceral environment through their enforcement. That is, the structure of reintegration, shaped by correctional enforcement of programming and release planning, creates a net of confinement through various avenues of control. This is linked to risk management, as CSC does not intend to be overly controlling, but instead aims to manage risk and reoffending, which inevitably shapes what reintegration looks like. In doing so, the space of reintegration often mimics conditions of imprisonment (i.e., a restrictive environment; continued punishment by state actors; and surveillance of behaviour). Reintegration, therefore, becomes an extension of the carceral state, wherein Indigenous women experience invisible walls of imprisonment due to a continuation of carceral power. However, this is a foundational principle of the carceral state due to its focus on maintaining control and discipline rather than investing in the self-determination of formerly incarcerated Indigenous women. As Vicki Chartrand, Associate Professor at Bishop's University, states:

We cannot simply reform the system. Since the inception of the system, it has been reform after reform, after reform. This ongoing onslaught of attention and energy only

reaffirms and reinforces what the system does and what it has been designed to do (*V. Chartrand, Journal of Prisoners on Prisons, 2022, p. 82*).

This was reaffirmed by Sherri Pranteau, a formerly incarcerated First Nations woman, who highlighted:

I sat in prison for close to 19 years and it is always a struggle. It is just insanity where the cycle is always the same with the idea that we ‘just need more prisons’. We need to put more money into more prisons and more guards and more this, and it just continues. If they invested in the communities with programs, healing, water and wellness, we would be able to take care of ourselves, our own communities, our own people (*S. Pranteau, Journal of Prisoners on Prisons, 2022, p. 79*).

### **Inability to be Present in Communities (Mechanism)**

Due to reintegration mirroring the conditions of confinement, Indigenous women frequently experienced alienation from their communities post-carceral release. This was credited to the various processes women had to individually navigate during re-entry. With no proper supports in place during re-entry, Indigenous women faced a lack of connection to the workforce, housing, and treatment services, thereby limiting their ability to flourish in their communities. In addition, the breakdown of family networks removed Indigenous women from their communities as they lost access to central and meaningful kinship networks and supports. As a result, Indigenous women inadvertently became carceral citizens and were removed from their communities due to the mechanisms in place within the space of reintegration. Overall, this community detachment was attributed to the hyper-responsibilization placed on Indigenous women to confront and resolve reintegration barriers without state support.

### *Disconnection from Social Institutions*

Struggles in the realms of employment and housing attainment were an emergent discourse in the disconnection experienced by formerly incarcerated Indigenous women. In terms of employment, Indigenous women recounted significant difficulties in securing a stable job to

support themselves and their families. This was attributed to a lack of marketable employment skills to compete in the job market upon carceral release. Consequently, community service workers recounted that formerly incarcerated Indigenous women either reverted to drug and alcohol abuse due to their unemployment or remained in precarious situations that were not conducive to their reintegration. Due to employment barriers, Indigenous women were found to experience significant housing insecurity and eventual dispossession from their communities. In other words, unemployment was viewed as a precursor to challenges in securing and maintaining long-term housing. As Vicki Chartrand argues:

When you're coming from poverty, you can't afford to live in a good place. Often the women would have to stay in area called the crack shacks and you can imagine what the crack shacks might have entailed. Of course, having worked for parole, you go in to do these community assessments, to see if they're going to be released into an environment that's suitable for their rehabilitation. They can't afford to do that. They can't afford to stay anywhere, other than an environment that's more than likely not going to be suitable for their parole (*V. Chartrand, Standing Committee on the Status of Women, December 7, 2017, p. 4*).

A lack of housing opportunities was linked to the general failure of the carceral state to provide Indigenous women with a smooth transition into the community. Community service workers in the field of housing articulated that despite Indigenous women's desire to return to their communities, there was limited funding, resources, and infrastructure in place to ensure that Indigenous women received placements in either culturally appropriate halfway houses or Section 84 releases to their community. The lack of transition housing was argued to be a severe impediment to Indigenous women's ability to experience community cohesion and improve their sense of self during reintegration. In terms of community connection, attention was placed on Indigenous women's loss of structure and support that comes with living in their community. As Pam Damoff (*recounting a conversation with a parole officer*) highlights:

Quite often there's no housing and no employment, so someone who is going to a homeless shelter falls into a negative path. The supports that many people get from family and friends are simply not available. Family ties may have been broken, or they may have left the reserve at a young age to live in an urban setting, but those supports aren't there (*P. Damoff, Standing Committee on the Status of Women, February 8, 2018, p.11*).

This was echoed by Chas Coutlee, a formerly incarcerated First Nations woman, as well as an anonymous formerly incarcerated Indigenous woman, who both recalled:

It's hard because I was funding myself, and I had no access to family to provide housing or financial help. Whenever I needed to go to the food bank, it would mean taking a day off work or school, and I couldn't afford to do that either (*Chas Coutlee, Releasing Hope, 2019, p. 242*).

Yeah, housing is a big issue actually. Cause what happened is, I coulda gone back to the streets, or I could have gone home, you know. I coulda done a whole lot of things right. So yeah, a lot of support – when you're coming from prison, when you're leaving – would be good to have. Like a support system waiting for you, because when you're released it's just like where do you go? (*Anonymous woman, Releasing Hope, 2019, p. 227*).

The lack of investment in housing and the continuation of Indigenous women's presence in their communities were also argued to have an influence on identity. Indigenous women recounted the profound impact homelessness had on how they viewed themselves during reintegration. As Lora 'Koala' Kwandibens, a formerly incarcerated Ojibwa woman who worked on a participatory health project with fellow formerly incarcerated Indigenous women, highlights:

There were some places they couldn't go anymore (i.e., the Mission community centre, friendship centre, care office, women's resource centres). They were banned because they used them so much and overstayed their welcome. They felt workers had lost faith in them. But they were homeless with nowhere else to go. They were looking for a place without any conditions – unconditional support (*L. Kwandibens, Releasing Hope, 2019, p. 210*).

#### *Breakdown of Family Networks*

The issue of family breakdown was an additional barrier during reintegration that strained the ability of Indigenous women to reconnect with their communities. In contrast to institutional

disconnection, which impacted where Indigenous women could physically live, family breakdown impacted how Indigenous women could relationally or socially exist and, therefore, remain in their community. The degree of women's relational connection was shaped by experiences of geographical distance and difficulty in family reunification. Indigenous women often had a difficult time returning/living in their communities as their communities were far or remote in relation to where women served their incarceration. The geographical distance between Indigenous women and their families was therefore highlighted as a contributing factor that decreased an Indigenous woman's chances to live in their communities. This was attributed to the lack of access to the community where Indigenous women could connect with community members and become embedded in community life. Ultimately, Indigenous women often experienced isolation from their community ties – a sentiment that was reminiscent of their time in prison. As Jacinthe Poulin, a Health and Services Advisor, states:

When women come to the cities, the social fabric is thinner. As a result, they – especially those who are released from a detention facility – are often significantly more isolated. Often, the people and family that were around them before are no longer there. The isolation is significant, and the friendship centres can help break it, but the social fabric around those women is very thin (*J. Poulin, Standing Committee on the Status of Women, February 13, 2018, p. 8*).

This was echoed by Diane Sere, a formerly incarcerated Algonquin woman, who states:

I was on strict bail conditions and could not leave the city, which made it very difficult because my two biggest supports, my father and my sister, were living five hours away. My mental health was declining and my stress was becoming unmanageable (*D. Sere, National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women & Girls, September 19, 2018, p. 101*).

In terms of family reunification, community service workers and Indigenous women highlighted the impact of losing custody of children and their ability to remain in their community. Central to this was how removing children from their mothers' care oftentimes resulted in Indigenous women leaving their communities and returning to the spaces that led to

their incarceration. Community service workers argued that there were severe gaps in services that supported Indigenous women's ability to parent their children. This was due to overreliance on fostering children outside of their communities and not prioritizing the familial relationships that exist within Indigenous communities. As a result, women saw no purpose in remaining in their communities due to the heartbreak and pain of losing their children – a key kinship bond that oftentimes motivated their attempts at successful reintegration. This was the case for Amber Christie, a formerly incarcerated Cree First Nations woman who was coerced into putting her daughter up for adoption. She states:

After I got out of jail, the ministry gave me visits with my daughter but told me multiple times that it would be better for her if I just put her up for adoption. After almost a year of their threats, I decided it was best for my daughter to be taken out of foster care and adopted into a new home. That day my life stopped. I took the Skytrain to Vancouver's Downtown Eastside and the real abuse began. I met a drug dealer who took care of me, but after a year he would only give me so much, so it was my turn to start feeding this ugly monster inside me. I did things that I swore I would never do. I was willing to do anything not to feel (*A. Christie, Releasing Hope, 2019, p. 110*).

Facing difficulties and being unable to return home due to difficulties in family reunification was also echoed by Sherri Pranteau. Reflecting on her reintegration experience, she articulates:

When I was sentenced, I was barred from my city, which means that I was not allowed to go back home. This brought me to Montreal, Quebec when I was released. It was a fresh start, but it took 10 years of trying to have some type of connection with my family. A lot of people have passed away over the years, and I have been repeatedly denied returning home (*S. Pranteau, Journal of Prisoners on Prisons, 2022, p.85*).

An anonymous formerly incarcerated Indigenous woman reflected that she no longer valued spirituality due to the loss of family connection during reintegration. She recounted:

Spirituality doesn't mean anything to me right now cause you know what I've been through. It's just not wanting to believe, to realize that my family's gone, my sisters are all gone. I don't believe in anything right now (*Anonymous woman, Releasing Hope, 2019, p. 214*).

Overall, some Indigenous women felt that reintegration constrained their ability to live in their communities. Women linked this feeling to strict reintegration processes, such as parole conditions, which restricted their movements and subsequent opportunities to return to their communities. As a consequence, Indigenous women were unable to reconnect with their families and community members due to geographical barriers. In addition, child welfare mechanisms governing the space of reintegration, which disrupted the structure of familial networks, made it difficult for women to stay in their communities. Due to a loss of connection with their children, Indigenous women found it painful and valueless to remain in a space that reminded them of what they had lost. Without consistent access to and support from their family, Indigenous women often struggled to stay connected and present within their communities.

#### *Responsibilization during Reintegration*

Central to the significant difficulty in maintaining community presence was the sense of responsabilization many Indigenous women felt during reintegration. The majority of women highlighted that upon carceral release, they were offered no resources, networks, or supports to confront barriers. Ultimately, reintegration was positioned as a difficult process marked by neoliberal logics due to the ongoing expectation that women should manage post-carceral life without state intervention. As Audra Andrews, Representative from the Union of Safety and Justice Employees, states:

Many offenders say to me that being in the community is sometimes more difficult than being incarcerated, because in the community, for example, they must negotiate poor employment opportunities, lack of affordable housing and child welfare issues, all the while dealing with their personal issues (*A. Andrews, Standing Committee on the Status of Women, February 13, 2018, p. 2*).

Indigenous women recounted the immense internal pressure they experienced when encountering re-entry barriers and engaging in a meaningful reintegration. For example, Odessa

Marchand and an unnamed individual, both of whom are formerly incarcerated First Nations women, highlighted:

I felt dropped and didn't know where to go for help. It made me feel like a failure – why was I asking for help and not getting it? I didn't have anybody coming to say, 'Odessa, how's it going? Do you want to do this? Do you want to do that?' (*O. Marchand, Releasing Hope, 2019, p. 232*).

I'm trying to get into treatment right now, so my prayers are all ongoing. I'm just constantly praying for, like, a miracle or some frickin' thing. I'm really relying, trying to rely on the Creator to help me get back on the wagon. I gotta stay balanced, I'm living in fear (*Anonymous woman, Releasing Hope, 2019, p. 231*).

Altogether, the carceral state's tendency to responsiblize Indigenous women was frequently viewed as contradictory in nature. Community service workers argued that Indigenous women were often blamed for their behaviours and actions during reintegration, with no recognition of the complicity of the state in setting up the conditions of re-entry. As a result, women were forced to overcome barriers during reintegration without any collective acknowledgement of the state's role in perpetuating Indigenous women's vulnerability. This was encapsulated by Kassandra Churcher, Executive Director of the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies, who argued:

This form of hyper-responsibility forces Indigenous women to be accountable, rehabilitate, reintegrate, while maintaining the safety of a public that has not ever kept her safe (*K. Churcher, National Inquiry into Missing & Murdered Indigenous Women & Girls, September 19, 2018, p. 109*).

### **Weakening of Indigenous Women's Personhood (Result)**

Reintegration, through its structure and mechanisms, ultimately resulted in the diminishing of Indigenous women's sense of self and understanding of being. Without adequate correctional programming, cultural support post-release, nor encouragement to remain active in their communities, Indigenous women recounted that they felt confined to an identity that consistently linked them back to the correctional setting, which they aspired to leave behind

during re-entry. This was highlighted by several formerly incarcerated Indigenous women. Their comments pivoted around notions of stigma, unworthiness, and isolation.

### *Stigma*

The lingering impacts of a criminal history were described by Indigenous women as a form of identity conflict due to the negative perceptions and stereotypes they experienced from the public. This was rooted in feelings that a criminal record prevented a holistic/nuanced representation of their identity and potential for rehabilitation. As an anonymous formerly incarcerated Indigenous woman accounted, “People judge you. They look at you in a different way, right, like ‘you’ve been in jail!’” (*Anonymous woman, Releasing Hope, 2019, p. 230*). This was particularly evident in women’s experiences in trying to gain employment and housing, which led to feelings of otherness and diminished status. Women highlighted that getting a job or passing housing checks were impossible due to the stigma associated with incarceration, which created an automatic exclusion from opportunities during reintegration. As a result, the majority of Indigenous women reflected that the stigma they experienced during reintegration eroded their self-esteem and sense of social belonging. Particularly, stigma impacted how women felt about their ability to thrive in their post-carceral life, which ultimately intensified feelings of low self-efficacy. As Diane Sere, a formerly incarcerated Algonquin woman, and Thalia Anthony, an activist for criminalized Indigenous women, summarized:

With the reintegration piece, it is the stigma of having that, you know, criminal record continues to follow you. And, this makes it very difficult for women to be able to get employment or to be able to get housing because, as you know, there is a lot of housing that are looking at, you know, criminal background checks to retain housing. So, these women are, unfortunately, without those supports out there, having a very, very difficult time (*D. Sere, National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women & Girls, September 19, 2018, p. 278*).

One woman, after she left, told me that it did not matter how hard she tried, her criminal history always follows her around. It never goes away. The way that prison shapes the

lives of women, by demonizing them and preventing them from fulfilling their potential, show how diminished society becomes by imprisoning people (*T. Anthony, Journal of Prisoners on Prisons, 2022, p. 86*).

This was the experience of an anonymous formerly incarcerated woman, who reflected:

My self-esteem was so high when I left here. But getting a job was impossible. That was the biggest downfall. The jail stigma was worse than I thought (*Anonymous woman, Missing & Murdered Indigenous Women & Girls Final Report, 2019, p. 642*).

#### *Unworthiness and Self-Sabotage*

In addition to stigma, formerly incarcerated Indigenous women experienced feelings of unworthiness when navigating life after prison. In particular, women felt that they did not deserve a ‘second chance’ after prison during their reintegration. This was attributed to the lack of affirmation Indigenous women received within prison regarding their potential post-carceral release. Consequently, Indigenous women became accustomed to a lack of validation, which reinforced feelings of unworthiness to receive care and support during re-entry. As Patrica Tate, a community service worker with Elizabeth Fry Society, reflected:

Women who are changing their ways and looking at becoming part of the community really want to be – have something meaningful that they can do. And, it is very hard for women who don’t necessarily feel that they are entitled to be healthy, to feel like they can actually move into just taking care of themselves for a while (*P. Tate, National Inquiry into Missing & Murdered Indigenous Women & Girls, September 19, 2018, p. 278*).

Community service workers stated that Indigenous women frequently engaged in self-destructive behaviours due to feelings of confusion, disconnection, and shame during their reintegration. As a result, women often reverted to their previous criminalized identity, as this was the only sense of normalcy they felt in their lives. This was the experience of Ruth ScalpLock, a formerly incarcerated First Nations woman. Reflecting on her re-entry, she said:

I was in jail, too, a long time ago, and I know how it feels. You’re so lost. You have good intention in there, but when you come out, you come out like me, being an alcoholic. I had all these good intentions, but what did I do when I came out? I was back to the street and got drunk (*R. ScalpLock, Standing Committee on the Status of Women, February 6, 2018, p. 12*).

The general sentiment of Indigenous women feeling undeserving of a meaningful reintegration was echoed by Veronique Picard, Justice Coordinator at Quebec Native Women Inc. and Julia, an Operational Manager at Buffalo Sage Wellness House. They both mention:

It is a negative experience in a lot of ways. They feel very disadvantaged, especially when they get out of prison. They always feel shame. Some decide not to go back to their communities. As we know, of course, their communities are small and everyone knows and talks about everyone else. So they end up in the city in a precarious situation (*V. Picard, Standing Committee on the Status of Women, December 7, 2017, p. 7*).

Yeah, I find with a lot of the residents, self-sabotage is a huge thing that happens. They're just not used to being told that they can do it and be cared for. So, then when they have that freedom to go do things, they choose to turn back to what they know, the old ways of stuff (*Julia, Prison Inside/Out Podcast, July 7, 2025, p. 8*).

### *Isolation*

In addition to stigma and feelings of self-blame/regret, Indigenous women experienced significant isolation during their reintegration. Feelings of isolation were intensified by the loss of support systems Indigenous women previously had during their imprisonment. Women recounted that once they entered post-carceral life, they felt lonely, lost, and unable to understand their new life outside of the formal boundaries of the prison. As Cee Jai Julian, a formerly incarcerated First Nations woman, and an anonymous formerly incarcerated Indigenous woman, stated:

We'd sit around the big drum and learn the songs. Learn how to pray. I would put my hand out – my fist out every day because I lost my freedom for what I had done. I had all the supports in that institution. I had my babies in that institution, my daughters. I put a tear drop on my eye to honour that life. As soon as I got out of jail, out of prison, I didn't have that support any more. My sisters were all inside. The Elder was in – at that institution. And I went back to that darkness, that dark road again. Started drinking, drugging (*C. Julian, National Inquiry into Missing & Murdered Indigenous Women & Girls, December 5, 2017, p. 18*).

Yeah, you get a little bag and away you go with your little envelope and you're gone-right? There was support there but I had to do it myself (*Anonymous woman, Releasing Hope, 2019, p. 227*).

Indigenous women felt out of place during reintegration and often reminisced for their previous life in prison. This attitude was attributed to Indigenous women's beliefs that prison was better than living in the community due to the lack of social bonds, programs, and a sense of connection experienced in the post-carceral environment of reintegration. As Felice Yeun, a Professor at Concordia University, highlighted:

The fact is that while Indigenous supports and programs in federal prisons need improvement, they're better than what many Indigenous women face in the community. I've heard numerous stories about how women revoke the conditions of their parole or reoffend so that they can go back. 'It's good to be back home amongst my family, they say when referring to their sisters, members of the Native Sisterhood, 'just in time for Christmas.' The point is that some women experience their culture in a positive light for the first time in prison, and once they are released, they don't know where to find support so that they continue this way of life (*F. Yeun, Standing Committee on the Status of Women, December 7, 2017, p. 13*).

## **Reintegration as a Form of Kinship**

### **Reciprocal Support to Heal During Reintegration**

Despite the space of reintegration being marked as difficult and alienating, Indigenous women nonetheless found solace through kinship relationships during re-entry. A prominent discourse in Indigenous women's descriptions and narratives of reintegration was the reciprocal support they received across various forms of service delivery. Through service delivery, women recounted how small, intimate acts of support and guidance played a pivotal role in practicing collective resistance to a negative sense of self. In this way, reciprocal support was said to cultivate healing during reintegration by promoting love, care and comfort for formerly incarcerated Indigenous women. This unfolded in three ways: emotional, informational, and practical support.

### *Emotional Support*

Indigenous women reflected that the emotional support they received during service delivery was pivotal in improving their confidence, trust, and feelings of dignity during reintegration. Particularly, kinship networks helped women reconnect with family – a key aspect of their sense of self and understanding of being. Community service workers were positioned as helpful in this process, as Indigenous women were encouraged and supported by workers to communicate with their families. This was in distinct contrast to the ways in which community workers removed children from women's care. Rather than reinforcing the common standard of family disconnection, community workers actively sought to reduce this reintegration barrier by encouraging the creation or maintenance of women's familial connections. Therefore, while community workers were often complicit in the state sanctioned practice of separating Indigenous women from their children, they also equally utilized their positions to reconnect families to alleviate women's feelings of disconnection from their children. As a result, Indigenous women were more likely to see improved outcomes with their reintegration as they (re)established relationships that motivated them to continue their meaningful re-entry. As Amber Christie reflected:

Dr. Martin encouraged me to reach out to my family. I wasn't sure how I felt about that. Reuniting with my family made me fearful because I didn't want to give them false hope that I was going to stay clean when I got out. A few weeks later, I had some more conversations with Dr. Martin and I decided I would see my family. My sisters were all grown up now and they came almost every weekend to see me. My mother had also stayed clean the whole time. My daughter was never far from my mind. When I was using it was easier; it numbed the pain. Now, I had been clean for six months and I still had a few months to go. My body ached for months, but eventually I felt better (*A. Christie, Releasing Hope, 2019, p. 171*).

Receiving emotional support during service delivery encouraged Indigenous women to confront trauma and heal their inner selves. Women highlighted that through relationship

building with staff and fellow formerly incarcerated women, they were better equipped to conceptualize their traumas and grief and engage in collective healing to move on to the next era of their post-carcer life. In doing so, women felt far more confident during reintegration, thanks to the kinship they developed through reciprocal service delivery, which improved their sense of acceptance and strength to confront barriers. For instance, Ruth ScalpLock recounted that as a community service worker, she actively sought to provide emotional support to women to improve their sense of self:

I walk with these people. When they (women) come to me, I always tell them, ‘You have so much potential. You can do it.’ I also try to help them to communicate. Instead of lashing out in anger and with violence, I help these women to identify and express their feelings. Once they have trusted me, I go all the way to help them. I believe in them. I’ve been there. I look at my own personal experience (*R. ScalpLock, Standing Committee on the Status of Women, February 6, 2018, p. 12*).

Likewise, Bubbles, a formerly incarcerated First Nations woman, mentioned that the emotional support she received during health care service delivery played a pivotal role in improving her confidence during reintegration:

Every couple of weeks, they have a group of student nurses come in and teach them about HIV. They’d have a person at the end tell their story. The more I got to talk, the more I got to do it, the more confident I start feeling. By telling my story to people, it does not matter which kind of crowd, just finding that one person who might get something out of it, who learning something from my trials in life, what happened to me and what I went through. My life just now seems to be taking flight and is slowly falling in place (*Bubbles, Walking the Red Path Photobook, 2025, p. 33*).

### *Practical Support*

In addition to emotional support, Indigenous women experienced practical support as an emergent form of support during service delivery. This form of support differed from emotional support in that Indigenous women were provided with the structural resources that were often missing in reintegration due to hyper-responsibilization. This included educational attainment,

employment opportunities, community programs and treatment services. This was reflected in the work of Buffalo Sage House, a community residential facility located in Edmonton, Alberta for Indigenous women on conditional release from prison. The practical support in this halfway house was centred on equipping Indigenous women with various resources that would translate into a meaningful re-entry. As Clarie Carefoot, Director at Buffalo Sage, states:

Buffalo Sage Wellness House provides culturally appropriate women-centred programs to assist residents on their healing journey and to support them to make good decisions, pursue education and employment, and reconnect with their children and family. The staff at Buffalo Sage provide a high quality of support and supervision to promote the safety of women as they establish themselves in the community (*C. Carefoot, Standing Committee on the Status of Women, February 6, 2018, p. 7*).

This was also the experience of Patrica Tate, who reflected:

We have a women's sharing circle that we facilitate, we have our feather there, we have an opportunity for women to come together who have come in conflict with the law, and who are back in the community, and who are working towards some of them getting their children, reunited with their children, some of them getting into a house of their own and reuniting with their families. And, we are able to engage with them and offer them the opportunity to go to ceremonies, we can take women to sweat lodge ceremonies, we often take them to picking medicines with the teachings that go along with the medicine picking, the pow wows and other ceremonies (*P. Tate, National Inquiry into Missing & Murdered Indigenous Women & Girls, September 19, 2018, p. 26*).

Indigenous women stated that these supports were transformative during their reintegration, as they felt the strain of personal responsabilization was lifted. This was credited to receiving cultural support that was lacking from the carceral state, feeling comfortable to rely on social networks, and being given opportunities to flourish in post-carceral life. Rubby Harry, a formerly incarcerated First Nations woman who spent time at Anderson Lodge Healing Centre for Women in East Vancouver, British Columbia, reaffirmed the strength of this support. They mention:

I had my own room and access to ceremony like sweats and drumming. Staff were there day and night if I needed support. With the encouragement of Elders and the staff, I started making blankets again – just like how my granny taught me to sew – and turned my craft into a way to earn income (*R. Harry, CBC News Opinion Piece, November 30, 2025*).

Overall, practical support weaved into service delivery, which centred on ensuring Indigenous women had both the opportunity and encouragement to reintegrate successfully. This support was inherently relational, built on the establishment of kinship relationships, through which Indigenous women received the dialogue, advocacy, and cooperation needed to improve their well-being during their reintegration. The collective intention of practical support was effectively summarized by Lora ‘Koala’ Kwandiben, who states:

It’s about sharing and coming together and bringing resources to one area and having a big talk about what to do for women in the community. Community support is so important for women who are high risk and violent, who aren’t allowed to access the services in Mission. I do peer support- I go talk to them. Then I go to the organizations who don’t want the women around and I say, ‘Why don’t’ you want that woman around? She’s still a woman.’ Our goal is to find out what we can do to access the services that are available in Mission. It’s just a start. Our goal is to find out where these women are at, and to find out how Women in 2 Healing can make Mission a stronger and healthier place for you (*L. Kwandiben, Releasing Hope, 2019, p. 63*).

### *Informational Support*

In conjunction with emotional and practical support, Indigenous women received informational support while accessing services. This form of support centred on educating Indigenous women about cultural ideologies, beliefs, and values to (re)introduce what it means to be an Indigenous person. In doing so, informational support taught Indigenous women about their culture to improve their sense of self and, therefore, positively reshape approaches to reintegration. In these moments, Indigenous women received and heard anti-colonial knowledge to challenge stereotypical depictions and self-perceptions of Indigenous peoples. As Sara Howdle, Assistant Director of W2B reflected:

Our curricula are anti-colonial in the sense that they center Indigenous created content and challenge the colonial lens that frame Indigenous Peoples as deficient, incapable victims. The stereotype of the incapable Indigenous person/nation serves the goal of settler-colonialism, which is to continually justify settler sovereignty over Indigenous Peoples and lands. We explore concepts and experiences through Indigenous authored art, films, comedy, literature and scholarship. The material centres Indigenous worldviews, joy, lived experience, and theory to counter the common settler view that Indigenous is synonymous with trauma. Our courses provide a much-needed alternative to deficit-based programming, which dominates in settler institutions, including prisons (*S. Howdle, Journal of Prisoners on Prisons, 2023, p. 18*).

Similarly, Teresa Edwards stated that mentorship was an additional avenue that helped formerly incarcerated Indigenous women understand their history and the distinct roles of Indigenous women prior to the introduction of settler colonial violence. She mentions:

What I teach the women I work with and mentor is that on a scale of 15,000 years, for 14,850 years Indigenous women were strong. We had thriving communities, very strong socio-economic trade and justice systems, and functioning people. It's only been in the last 150 years that we've known these issues, largely tied to residential schools. It's not in our DNA to be on welfare, addicted, or in prison, so we can change this. We can rewrite. We can create a new path for our people (*T. Edwards, Standing Committee on the Status of Women, February 13, 2018, p. 15*).

Informational support was well received by Indigenous women, who associated this type of support with transforming their understanding of themselves and their identity, and helping them develop a positive purpose in life. For instance, Julia stated that she saw firsthand how Indigenous women accepted informational support, which improved their sense of self during reintegration. Reflecting on her experience, Julia stated:

I've had a lot of ladies come here and they're like, 'I'm nervous, like, I don't know anything. Is that OK?' And absolutely, like we'll teach you along the way and you'll slowly get into, back into your culture and reconnecting with their culture. It is, I see a smoother reintegration into the community because they find out sense of belonging and it provides a big support network for them. So even if they don't have that background that they grew up with to start here, they start here, here's a new beginning (*Julia, Prison Inside/Out Podcast, July 7, 2025, p. 9*).

Indigenous women echoed this sentiment, as they discussed the pivotal changes they experienced in their identity and in their improved understanding of their culture. As one anonymous woman who resided at OOHL and another anonymous woman currently at the lodge stated:

Something was missing from me growing up and my life experiences and the way I was raised. I never really had a good understanding of spirituality until I started engaging in those ceremonies and just acknowledging my culture and like yeah, it was just so meaningful and that's exactly what was missing was my spirituality in that sense of identity and who I am (*Anonymous woman, CSC Healing Lodge Report, 2023, p. 16*).

There's everything that's offered here, Sundance, sweat lodge, they take us out to round dances, pow wows. Anything they can offer to help us build up our identity and that is what helped me the most. 'Cause growing up in my community there was nothing like that. I didn't have an identity until I came to jail. I have strong values in my life and I didn't have that growing up as a youth (*Anonymous woman, CSC Healing Lodge Report, 2023, p. 17*).

### **Kinship Networks**

The power of kinship relationships in the space of reintegration was a recurring discourse discussed by formerly incarcerated Indigenous women. While kinship can encompass blood kin (i.e., children, parents, grandparents, siblings, etc.), Indigenous women spoke more to the impact of non-blood kinship relationships in shaping their experiences with re-entry. This included connections with fellow Indigenous women they shared their correctional sentences with, as well as Elders, who played distinct, yet mutually exclusive roles during their reintegration.

#### *Fellow incarcerated Indigenous women*

When reflecting on influential relationships during re-entry, many Indigenous women frequently discussed their sisterhood, which consisted of fellow previously incarcerated Indigenous women. These sorts of kinship relationships were powerful, as they provided Indigenous women with a support system to rely on when preparing for and/or navigating life after prison. In particular, many recounted the relationships they cultivated with fellow

Indigenous women in prison, which pushed them to rethink their approach and feelings towards reintegration. This was the case for Valerie Desjarlais, a formerly incarcerated Indigenous woman who highlighted that the kinship she developed with other incarcerated Indigenous women allowed her to see her potential during re-entry. Reflecting on her experience, she said:

The women serving life befriended me and really took the time to talk to me about trying to change my life. One of the women told me, ‘even if you feel no one gives a shit about you, you got to learn to start caring for yourself.’ And ‘if no one believes in you, you got to learn to believe in yourself, this is not the place for you’. That longing I felt to once again feel loved and safe started surfacing, only this time the lifers were becoming my family, they gave me that sense that I was no longer alone (*V. Desjarlais, Journal of Prisoners on Prisons, 2011, p. 63*).

Through this unique relationship, Indigenous women experienced significant motivation to become stronger women due to the ongoing encouragement they received from the sisterhood they developed with other incarcerated Indigenous women. An anonymous Indigenous woman who previously resided at Buffalo Sage Wellness House discussed this. She mentioned that her healing journey and transformation of self were heavily guided by the women she met in her sharing circle. As she puts it:

Getting to know the other ladies. Listen to their stories, me sharing my story. And it is different because it’s a sharing circle, nothing is shared outside of that circle. And it’s a person level and you realize you are not alone. I realized that I am not alone in my path and there are other people that are in my situation and it just made me open up to realize that, yeah I did come from a traumatized background, but I wasn’t alone and there’s other ladies under my own circumstances (*Anonymous woman, CSC Healing Lodge Report, 2023, p. 34*).

As a result, women highlighted that their confidence improved during reintegration as they strove to show other Indigenous women with similar backgrounds that a successful and meaningful reintegration was possible. Again, this intention stemmed from the previous support Indigenous women received from other incarcerated Indigenous women, which they felt

obligated to pay forward during re-entry. This was evident in the experiences of Amber Christie and Rychele, two formerly incarcerated First Nations women. They mention:

I really felt that if these girls could do this, so could I. We all stuck together, and we found that we really wanted to make a difference for women coming out of prison. We wanted to bridge the gaps that have held back so many women when they are released. We were going to help others the way we were helped (*A. Christie, Releasing Hope, 2019, p. 183*).

I know that as long as I stayed connected to my amazing support network, I will be able to get through any obstacle that is put in my path. I live each day guided by the 7 Sacred Teachings and I'm honoured to be able to set an example for other women, Indigenous or otherwise. Showing them that no matter what our stories are, no matter what we have been through, or where we come from, we are strong, we are brave, we are resilient and we do succeed (*Rychele, Walking the Red Path Photobook, 2025, p. 29*).

### *Elders*

Indigenous Elders were another source of support that Indigenous women relied on within the space of reintegration. Elders played a more spiritual role in Indigenous women's lives as they navigated reintegration. Elders helped women either remember or (re)discover what it means to be an Indigenous woman outside the confines of the correctional system. This was attributed to the spiritual guidance and positive words of affirmation they shared, which allowed Indigenous women to release their negative perception of themselves. The impact of the relationship between Elders and Indigenous women, in terms of female identity, was extensively discussed by Chas Coutlee. As they put it,

Elder Holy Cow haloed me; put back a piece I didn't know was missing. I carried shame for being Indigenous. Because I have light skin, not everyone knows I am, in fact Indigenous. I hear racist judgements and I internalized the racism. I felt shame for being Indigenous. Elder Holy Cow became a positive role model for me, and she helped me remove the shame. This was a huge part of my healing. Elder Holy Cow believed in me. She was an honourable and truthful woman. She told me my spirit is strong – I believed her. Holy Cow always reminded us, 'Just because this where you're at right now, doesn't mean that this is your final destination. You're someone's mother, someone's aunt, and someday you're going to be someone's granny, and one day you need to pass the

teachings down'. I wanted more than anything to be a good mum, a good role model for my daughter. And today, I am. Indigenous culture saves lives, and education creates choices to live well and become productive members of society (*C. Coutlee, Releasing Hope, 2019, p. 229*).

Elders were often the first individuals to teach Indigenous women culturally relevant understandings of their womanhood. This introduction was transformative for the majority of Indigenous women, as they felt a sense of belonging for the first time in their lives and a sense of purpose outside of the criminal world. As Cee Jai Julian reflected, her Elder was pivotal in how she viewed herself when she learned what 'moon time' represented for Indigenous women. Summarizing her experience, Cee Jai reflected:

I looked at them, 'What do you mean, moon time? Like, it's day time.' And I didn't understand, and that Elder was so kind. She says to me, "Well, your moon time is your special time, the sacred time. And I was looking at her. 'It's when a woman has her period, but it's very sacred, very beautiful.' And I cried. I cried when I heard that because I never heard someone speak about me being a woman and being beautiful, and having that sacred time. I never hear that ever, and I remember that today. I love that Elder. She's still in my life today (*C. Julian, National Inquiry into Missing & Murdered Indigenous Women & Girls, December 5, 2017, p. 17*).

In addition to providing knowledge of Indigenous culture, Elders were also revered as a kinship relationship that allowed Indigenous women to engage in reintegration according to cultural worldviews (i.e., healing). In doing so, Indigenous women articulated that they (re)affirmed their connection to culture, tradition, and spirituality that were either missing or previously stripped by the settler state. This was significant since it allowed Indigenous women not only to understand but also to embrace the inherent values associated with their Indigeneity. For instance, an anonymous Indigenous woman residing in OOHL described the power of Elders in connecting her to the importance of healing and her culture more broadly for eventual release. As they note:

I'm able to talk to them about anything like my grief and loss, and my past traumas. I was able to open up with them more, and that kind of like helped me to take the initiative to start my healing process. I don't know, they teach me so much. They tell me stories about my ancestors, they teach me traditional songs, how to respect myself, how to respect others, just how to be a good human being for the world (*Anonymous woman, CSC Healing Lodge Report, 2023, p. 37*).

The impact of reconnection to culture and identity from Elders was also echoed by Rychele, who stated:

While incarcerated I had the opportunity to connect with the culture, the Elders and get involved in ceremony and drumming. This where my healing journey began. In this past, I never really felt like I fit in anywhere. Now, having culture in my life, and building a relationship with the Creator, I am connected to this part of my identity. I feel complete. It has changed my life and despite what I had to go through; I will forever be grateful (*Rychele, Walking the Red Path Photobook, 2025, p. 29*).

### **Flourishing the Indigenous Inside**

Despite attempts at carceral control, Indigenous women, through their relationships, disrupted hegemonic oppression during re-entry. This was credited to support received from kinship networks, which allowed women to bring personal perspectives into the space of reintegration. Personal perspectives centred on what Indigenous women wanted their reintegration and subsequent post carceral outcomes to look like, rather than adhering to the expectations reinforced by the state. Said differently, kinship networks gave women the opportunity to experience reintegration according to what they valued and/or desired to embody as they navigated life after prison. As a result, Indigenous women often engaged in practices of cultural resurgence during re-entry. In fact, returning to, and in many cases, hearing about culture for the first time, allowed Indigenous women to (re)claim what was erased, suppressed, or denied during their time in the correctional system. This occurred through exercising Indigenous alternatives to (re)build identity, igniting a sense of belonging and purpose in life, and practicing self-love.

### *Re (discovering) Indigenous practices*

The journey Indigenous women experienced during reintegration was consistently marked by the process of approaching, engaging, and experiencing Indigenous spiritual and cultural practices and protocols. This included a diverse set of actions aimed at opening and maintaining a pathway for authentic Indigeneity to survive. Through such processes, Indigenous women frequently (re)generated cultural practices and ancestral ways of living that collectively enabled a sense of pride in themselves as Indigenous peoples. Importantly, this was associated with the kinship support Indigenous women received as they prepared for release, as well as during their re-entry. This was evident in the experiences of two anonymous residents at OOH, who explained the significance of rediscovering Indigenous practices as they planned for their re-entry. They note:

I never understood or appreciated myself or my culture and now I'm in a place where I really like myself and I really love myself and it's taken a long time to actually get to that place and I feel like understanding my culture and I guess being involved in it really helped me find myself, find that balance I needed (*Anonymous woman, CSC Healing Lodge Report, 2023, p. 16*).

I found it's like really helpful because like my ancestors, my people are really connected to Mother Earth and just to be away from all the hustle of an urban city is great. It makes me take that time out to work on what I need to work on being in this environment. It feels very spiritual because I know when they started this place, they did it in a spiritual way. It's just like everything about this place is really spiritual. We all have our teachings that they give us are connected to this place, it's part of Mother Earth (*Anonymous woman, CSC Healing Lodge Report, 2023, p. 25*).

During reintegration, flourishing the Indigenous inside occurred by applying cultural knowledge, often learned and obtained inside the correctional system, to everyday practices. As Alison, a formerly incarcerated Mohawk and Ojibwe woman, recounts, engaging in cultural revitalization in prison with her kinship support networks was pivotal in how she explored re-

entry and maintained her connection to culture. Discussing her experiences with a prison program that featured First Nations traditions, she said:

Sunrise ceremonies, full moon ceremonies and, you know, making like real game meat. So, you like, you know, you learn to make all our traditional foods and stuff like that and there's a big drum and you do circles every day. But, before that, there was all this stuff that I hadn't done before that I was just like, 'Wow this so great'. Like, I'm just so overjoyed to be part of it. And, so I just embraced everything and I drummed and I sang. It was awesome. It's what I needed. I really believe now, and I know that was the piece that was missing, that I missed growing up, is my culture, my connection the Creator. Because now I feel whole, because he's in my life every day. I practice my culture every day, regardless of if its a smudge or a prayer, or saying thank you for waking up another day. And I never had that connection (*Alison, Life Jolt Podcast, 2021, p. 12*).

### *Understanding Purpose in Life*

In addition to (re)discovering cultural practices, the space of reintegration also allowed Indigenous women to understand their role and broader purpose in life. Many women recounted that after leaving the correctional system, they became cognizant of who they were, why this mattered, and their evolving potential in their communities. This was reflected in the experiences of Chantel Huel, as well as an anonymous Indigenous woman, both residents of Buffalo Sage Wellness House. They mentioned:

I just kind of have more sense of who I am in a sense and where I came from and how I got to be where I am. Like, I have more understanding because before I really didn't know too much about it (*Anonymous woman, CSC Healing Lodge Report, 2023, p. 17*).

I remember Kookum Bonny sharing the story [We're Eagles, Not Chickens!] when I lived in Pathways. We learned it in a circle – within a traditional healing program house. I learned things about myself, light bulbs were going off constantly. It gave me a greater understanding of who I am and what I can do (*C. Huel, Journal of Prisoners on Prisons, 2023, p. 13*).

Notably, this newfound approach to life's purpose was shaped by women's kinship networks. Kinship relationships, rooted in love and care, were powerful not only in teaching women of their meaningful purpose but also in supporting Indigenous women in maintaining a

transformed identity. As Eric Michael, Executive Director of Willow Cree Healing Lodge, recounted on the impact of kinship within healing lodges on Indigenous women's sense of self:

The healing lodge aspires to achieve the spirit of wahkohowin, a Cree spiritual law that encourages all living things to come together in a spirit of kinship. Wahlohtowin means 'everything is related' and identifies the sacred obligations we have to one another, recognizing the social history experienced by Indigenous peoples disrupted the roles, values and traditions of the Indigenous family. The healing lodge's commitment is to restore the kinship ties to the community for each nicisan, to ignite their sense of belonging to the greater purpose and to support their effort to overcome the stigma that comes with incarceration (*E. Michael, Standing Committee on the Status of Women, February 8, 2018, p. 10*).

Indigenous women argued that this sort of kinship-based support was influential in how they viewed themselves post-carceral release. Particularly, women felt more confident to pursue opportunities that reflected their purpose in life, which often centred on providing reciprocal support, love, and guidance to their community. Again, this was attributed to the guidance women received from their kinship networks, both inside and outside the correctional system. This was the case for Rubby Harry, who states:

That support of culture and ceremony gave me direction and showed me that healing can also build independence — something that had never happened in past releases. Before, I always had to search for culture on my own. At Anderson Lodge, developing life and job skills was part of daily life along with ceremonies, teachings and Elders. During that time, I also began working in construction, learning metal fabrication and earning my construction safety officer and first aid certifications. Later, I joined the Phil Bouvier Family Centre, where I have held various roles and still work today supporting Indigenous parents and children through ceremony. While at Phil Bouvier, I started a catering company, which continued to grow and eventually became Medicine Wheels, a catering food truck serving fusion dishes such as bison chili, elk stew and my grandmother's bannock. Food brings people together in ways that words cannot, letting me share that sense of connection and remind others that it is its own kind of medicine. Every role I have — mother, worker, elder, business owner — is now grounded in culture and the teachings that helped me come home the right way (*R. Harry, CBC News Opinion Piece, November 30, 2025*).

### *Self – Love and Transformation of Self*

Central to Indigenous women's reintegration experience was the self-love cultivated after leaving the correctional environment. Despite the institutionalization experienced in prison, women reflected that they actively resisted imposing a negative self-image during re-entry. This motivation was linked to women's increased confidence in their ability to change their lives – an attitude further supported by their kinship networks. This was evident in the experiences of Chantel Huel, Rychele, and Ullria, three formerly incarcerated First Nations women. They stated:

At first, I was like, 'I can't do this. I want to quit'. But I had supports. I can hear Kokum Bonny saying this to me, 'Take a chance on yourself' or I would reassess my goals with Sara. I say to the reader, 'Believe in yourself. You can do this'. Also, the biggest part of my learning came from those 15 classmates of mine that came inside from the out. Take a chance on yourself and believe in yourself because I guarantee these people believe in you. They support you, they walk with you. Like I said, even when you leave that institution, they're still walking beside me and I'm forever grateful for that. Take a chance on yourself (*C. Huel, Journal of Prisoners on Prisons, 2023, p. 24*).

I've learned to love myself, learned to forgive myself and learned who I am and what I stand for. I no longer feel like I am defined by the mistakes I've made. I can treat myself with kindness and compassion and I now know that I deserve a beautiful life (*Rychele, Walking the Red Path Photobook, 2025, p. 29*).

I went above and beyond to take back control of my rightful and inherent place in society as a proud Inuk woman (*Ullria, Walking the Red Path Photobook, 2025, p. 21*).

As a result of continued self-love, Indigenous women frequently experienced a transformation of self during reintegration. This transformation centred on recognizing that, despite the hardships associated with re-entry, Indigenous women were not confined to the labels and identities that once defined them during their correctional sentence. In doing so, women recognized and actualized their ability to flourish and regenerate their cultural sense of self. This was the case for Sherri Pranteau and an anonymous woman known by Donald Meikle, Executive Director of Saskatoon Downtown Youth Centre:

It makes me think that, even in the hardest of times, I have to get up and appreciate the day and be grateful and, you know, we could change the world one day at a time. I believe that if we keep pushing that we will heal each other. And if we take care of our women, I believe that the rest of the world will follow (*S. Pranteau, Journal of Prisoners on Prisons, 2022, p. 89*).

One mom who came into Sweet Dreams was gang-involved, and her child was in care with a family member. She had an addiction to crystal meth and suffered from severe anxiety. Today she's a functioning member of the community who has completed treatment, attends school daily, works with counsellors, attends play therapy with her son regularly, and is a mentor to her peers. Since coming into the program, she's acquired her driver's licence, bought a vehicle, and has worked diligently to build trust and to repair damaged relationships with her family and with her community (*D. Meikle, Standing Committee on the Status of Women, January 30, 2018, p. 14*).

## **Conclusion**

This chapter presented findings on how formerly incarcerated Indigenous women's identities are created and negotiated in the space of reintegration. The results revealed that women's identities during re-entry are constantly pushed between the boundaries of carceral domination and cultural revitalization. Due to the extension of carceral logics into the space of reintegration, Indigenous women were frequently confined to a state-imposed identity that kept them bound to their carceral histories. At the same time, however, women actively resisted these logics and tendencies by relying on support from kinship networks to cultivate a culturally relevant identity. The following chapter will expand on these findings from the data and demonstrate how Indigenous women's identities, despite being shaped by carceral geographies and logics, are nonetheless transformed during reintegration in ways that point to the (anti-colonial) power of kinship.

## **ANALYSIS**

### **Introduction**

This thesis was guided by an interest in understanding how formerly incarcerated Indigenous women engage in identity transformation in the space of reintegration. Through an analysis of Indigenous women's exploration of their sense of self post-carcer life, this chapter describes what reintegration looks like for Indigenous women in Canada based on the collected data. Rather than reinforcing the common finding found within much of the more critical scholarship, which tends to argue that women are frequently confined to precarious environments during reintegration that reinforce the extension of settler colonial power, this research project sought to understand the complexity of re-entry. Therefore, I argue that while reintegration is marked by negotiating the tension between settler colonialism and resurgence and can thus be understood as contradictory and contentious, kinship relationships proved to be a very powerful factor that informed the identity transformation of formerly incarcerated Indigenous women.

### **The Common View of Reintegration – Ongoing Settler Colonial Control**

In the literature, reintegration is often imagined and thought about as an ongoing settler colonial practice. As Patrick Wolfe (2006) articulates, settler colonialism is multifaceted in its expression, but at its core, includes a variety of state-charged practices aimed at removing Indigenous peoples from the fabric of settler society. This is the case for Indigenous women leaving prison, who continue to experience ongoing attempts to control and eliminate their sense of self, as well as their physical bodies, through carceral control during the process of reintegration. On this point, settler colonial relations manifest during re-entry in insidious ways, where Indigenous women are confronted with practices that appear 'neutral' for all formerly incarcerated individuals but instead are still prison-like. This is best understood through the lens of carceral geography – that is, the extension of the 'carceral' outside the formal walls of the

prison. While the phenomenon of carceral geography is commonly experienced by all formerly incarcerated populations, Indigenous women experience a distinct form of carceral geography that produces, and therefore functions, as an ongoing settler colonial relation or technique of government. The conceptualization of reintegration as a site of ongoing settler colonial domination and control is connected to the space's role in supporting the socio-spatial expulsion, identity destruction, and eventual elimination of Indigenous women in Canada.

### *The Link Between Poor Reintegration Support and Eliminary Intentions*

As Indigenous women and community service workers recounted, the carceral release planning for Indigenous women is completely inadequate and under resourced. While bureaucratic issues with release planning are a common feature of the correctional system, the deliberate lack of attention towards Indigenous women's distinct gendered and cultural needs is reflective of a settler colonial objective of the state rooted in a politics of neglect. Poor reintegration support is thus critical to reproducing settler colonial relations, as such neglect provides the state with ownership over what Indigenous women's reintegration and subsequent post-carceral lives look like. To illustrate, Indigenous women frequently experienced a lack of meaningful resources and structural support that would improve their life opportunities in the space of reintegration. Notably, these limitations did not stem from Indigenous women's lack of willingness to participate in correctional programming or plan for their imminent releases, but rather, from the authority of the carceral state, which dictates how the space of re-entry is structured, accessed, and ultimately experienced by Indigenous women. For Indigenous women, this carceral power derives from the state's political choice to overemphasize austerity and subsequent neoliberalism in the space of reintegration, which tends to keep women confined to precarious conditions that keep them linked to the prison. In other words, by not providing

Indigenous women with adequate support that reaffirms their agency and relationality to their community, the carceral state effectively extends its formal control to the informal, 'free' space of reintegration. These constraints are reflected in CSC's growing involvement in the housing options, employment opportunities and conditions of movement - key factors of re-entry that facilitate the transformation from 'prisoner' to 'rehabilitated member of society'. The goal of this practice is to ensure that reintegration remains a heavily surveilled and deterministic space that Indigenous women must navigate according to the carceral state's rules.

This can be understood as a form of carceral redlining. That is, the process of criminalizing specific communities that oftentimes leads to their eventual incarceration. As Rai Reece (2020) argues, carceral redlining comprises of varying socio-political networks that actively work to socially control Indigenous peoples to diminish any threats or potential harm to the interests of the settler state. In the context of reintegration for Indigenous women, carceral redlining was reflected in women's experiences with homogenized programming that did not support self-determination, strict parole conditions that prevented community building, and limited cultural housing that promoted kinship networks. These practices were indicative of the state prioritizing certain economic and political objectives, which resulted in a lack of attention toward funding adequate release planning. In doing so, the state relied on neoliberal logics during reintegration whereby Indigenous women were forced to navigate re-entry on their own with limited opportunities and resources. As Bourdieu (1998) states, neoliberalism is a political state project that replaces collective structures that promote social cooperation with intensified state authority, pure market logic and hyper-individualism to discipline and manage individuals. This was reflected by the state's decision to transfer responsibility to Indigenous women, which

amplified the harshness of reintegration as women often did not have the tools, guidance, or networks to rely on when attempting to re-enter their communities upon carceral release.

Ultimately, Indigenous women's (re)connection to resurgence practices that would improve their ability to engage in their rehabilitation and subsequent reintegration meaningfully became more difficult to access. Carceral redlining, therefore, acted as an insidious mechanism that confined Indigenous women to circumstances that enhanced their precarity to ongoing criminalization (i.e., criminogenic neighbourhoods, unemployment, and familial separation). In other words, carceral redlining frequently leads to the reproduction of the revolving door of incarceration by oftentimes limiting Indigenous women from accessing the resources and networks that would prevent their contact with the criminal world after carceral release. As a result, the correctional system upholds settler colonial power, while simultaneously contributing to the physical, social, and political displacement of Indigenous women, thereby furthering white supremacy.

This kind of control acts as a strategy of elimination in that it reproduces the ethnic transfer and transfer by assimilation of Indigenous women. Veracini (2024) argues that ethnic transfer occurs when Indigenous peoples are forcibly removed from their lands under the authority of the settler state. This is highly relevant to the experience of formerly incarcerated Indigenous women, as the prison represents the first phase of ethnic transfer, which is then followed by other forms of transfer in the space of reintegration. Incarceration is an embodiment of ethnic transfer as Indigenous women are removed from their communities and placed in state-controlled prisons. Indigenous women are methodically displaced from their community as incarceration dictates their location in settler society. However, ethnic transfer does not end with incarceration. Rather, it is sustained during re-entry. Since prison creates the environment for

release and, therefore, remains intimately linked to reintegration, a lack of adequate release planning for re-entry often results in women experiencing insufficient housing options, homelessness, and physical isolation from their communities. As a result, Indigenous women are systematically removed from their territories and subsequently placed in precarious environments that enable their ongoing relationship with the carceral system. This is a manifestation of ethnic transfer, as the conditions of reintegration often transfer Indigenous women out of their communities and back into state-enforced spaces, such as the prison. Ultimately, this sort of removal increases the settler state's ability to enforce boundaries on Indigenous rights and bodies.

Transfer by assimilation is an additional strategy of elimination present in Indigenous women's reintegration experience. Through strict limits on how Indigenous women can navigate the space of reintegration (i.e., parole conditions), the settler state attempts to impose lifestyle changes upon Indigenous women. In doing so, this strategy tries to force Indigenous women to become better aligned with the racial and behavioural norms of settler society. This process creates eliminatory conditions, as the undermining of Indigenous women's personhood disrupts Indigenous ways of being, relating, and knowing, which in turn reduces the presence of cultural foundations that support Indigenous continuity. This facilitates the displacement of Indigenous women as the social and political organization of Indigenous livelihood is slowly eroded. Hence, while poor reintegration support frequently signals bureaucratic shortcomings and political neglect, a critical unpacking of this practice highlights that the state's ongoing decisions to underfund and underresource re-entry programming lead to eliminatory conditions within reintegration.

### *Socio-Spatial Expulsion and Whiteness*

In tandem with poor reintegration support, the institutional disconnection experienced among formerly incarcerated Indigenous women is an additional manifestation of settler colonialism within reintegration. As seminal settler colonial scholars such as Moreton-Robinson (2015), Coulthard (2014), and Razack (2015) have highlighted, whiteness plays an inherent function in justifying the role, authority and continuance of settler colonialism. It is through whiteness that a perpetual divide is created between individuals marked as compatible and worthy of existence (i.e., settlers), and those deemed as unstable and dishonourable to society (i.e., Indigenous peoples). Whiteness, therefore, is the optimal standard for the values and behaviours associated with a nation. For formerly incarcerated Indigenous women, whiteness is used as a tool to both create and legitimize their socio-spatial expulsion from society during reintegration. This is evident in the lack of investment (i.e. housing insecurity, community disconnection, and parole restrictions) made by the state to ensure Indigenous women are included in society after prison. In this way, Indigenous women are not randomly, but rather *systematically*, displaced and subsequently concealed from settler society. This is attributed to the fact that Indigenous women's presence in the space of reintegration is constructed as an inherent disruption to the everyday lives and operation of settler society. Consequently, the only inclusionary spaces for Indigenous women are environments that uphold settler colonial ideologies and therefore require women to abandon their community and culture to 'fit into' settler society.

The settler state frequently justifies that this socio-spatial expulsion is not racially motivated, as 'all' formerly incarcerated populations experience this inequitable phenomenon due to their correctional history. In other words, socio-spatial expulsion is constructed as a by-

product of carceral citizenship – a distinct category of formerly incarcerated individuals marked by a loss of full citizenship rights and privileges after carceral contact (Miller & Stuart, 2017). By relying on carceral citizenship, the state effectively rationalizes the expulsion of Indigenous women as a result of the inequities surrounding how society perceives and treats incarcerated impacted individuals, over the state's prioritization of maintaining whiteness. However, it can be argued that this practice operates as an intentional settler colonial objective. As Indigenous women are already viewed as a violation of 'privileged' white standards due to historical sexist and racial stereotypes, incarceration has become an additional mechanism to denote women to a 'second class' within settler society. To clarify, involvement in the correctional system is insidiously used by the state to group Indigenous women as undeserving of participation in settler society under the guise of being ex-prisoners who are often characterized as dangerous, immoral, and unable to reform. Incarcerated impacted Indigenous women, therefore, are a violation of 'whiteness' as they are Indigenous *and* ex-prisoners— two social identities that have been rendered as incompatible with the values, purity, and behaviours of settler society.

However, with the settler state reducing its reliance on the public, and therefore blatant stereotyping of Indigenous women as a justification for their social expulsion, incarceration has become a more socially acceptable defence for the settler state's control and expulsion of Indigenous women from society during their reintegration. Put differently, visible acts such as the Indian Act, the Sixties Scoop, and sterilization policies were previously privileged by the state as a mechanism to vindicate their role in removing Indigenous women from settler life. Yet, with increased recognition and subsequent condemnation of the state's complicity in othering Indigenous women, the state has been forced to shift its approach towards defending women's expulsion. Incarceration, therefore, has become an alternative as the state can rely on crime

control and public safety as factors that warrant women's socio-spatial expulsion. The settler state frames the removal of Indigenous women as a practice that protects settler society from dangerous individuals (i.e., incarcerated impacted individuals) due to their criminal histories and subsequent risk of perpetrating harm. As a result, Indigenous women are not viewed as being targeted on the basis of their race, as previously reflected in the state's approach, but rather due to their criminal involvement – an approach deemed more rational/appropriate amongst society. Ultimately, whiteness remains a hidden but motivating factor in removing Indigenous women from the social fabric of society, as Indigenous women are targeted under the guise of protecting society from deviant ex-criminals.

#### *Destruction of Indigenous Female Identity and Sense of Being*

Although reintegration relies strongly on structural forces to control Indigenous women, reintegration also incorporates a liberal and individualistic approach to managing Indigenous women. This is evident in the state's attempt to destroy Indigenous female identity through psychologically targeting women's sense of personhood and belonging in society. As various scholars such as Fanon (1984), Memmi (1967), and Alfred (2023) have argued, physical violence is not the sole determining factor in sustaining and reproducing the settler colonial relationship. Rather, it is the undermining of Indigenous people's roles in their communities and the degradation of their sense of self that further reproduces the settler colonial relationship. With respect to the role of incarceration, Kassandra Churcher (2018) highlights, "when they're [Indigenous women] removed from their community for incarceration for an extended period of time, and then have to go back with the social stigma of that, there's also an impact generationally. It disrupts their own development into integral members of their community, which is desperately needed" (p.176). This is due to the fact that a negative sense of self makes it

difficult for Indigenous peoples to engage in resurgence practices that support the revitalization and sustenance of Indigenous land, culture, and nationhood. As a consequence, Indigenous people experience a delegitimization of their identity by the settler state through its psychological processes, which can reduce their likelihood of connecting with their cultural realities.

For formerly incarcerated Indigenous women, the attempt to destruct their identity unfolds when the state produces and enforces release conditions that lead to stigma, feelings of unworthiness, and isolation. This psychological dimension of settler carceral control attempts to reinforce Indigenous women's carceral identities by positioning women as 'Others' who do not belong in settler society. By confining Indigenous women to an identity that keeps them linked to the prison, reinforces their perpetual status as 'Other', and removes communal connection, the state insidiously tries to weaken Indigenous women's personhood – a core feature of settler colonialism. This increases the likelihood of diminished self-esteem among women, as they do not feel accepted or welcomed as productive members of society, but rather as perpetual 'Others'. This reproduces marginalization, wherein Indigenous women are consistently reminded that they do not belong in settler society as they do not possess or express the acceptable values set out by the settler state. As Bonny Spencer (2023) reflects, "our women have to realize that they have an identity outside of the prison institution. We need our [Indigenous] women out there in the real world. We don't need our women warehoused in institutions. They must step outside of the labels and define who they are as Indigenous women" (p.17). Overall, Indigenous women's seclusion, which is cultivated by state interventions and a politics of neglect, actively leads to making it difficult, but not impossible, for Indigenous women to engage or reconnect

with their kinship and community, which play a pivotal role in teaching and reinforcing what it means to be an Indigenous woman.

The practice of undermining Indigenous women's identity and sense of being reflects the state's ongoing effort to codify and regulate Indigenous female identity. Codification can be understood as the process by which a colonial government imposes its own social and legal definitions of identity on Indigenous peoples (Coté, 2001). Through this act, the settler state expands its agenda of increasing its influence in Indigenous societies by dictating how and where Indigeneity can manifest. In the context of reintegration, this occurs through the state's creation of a legal category of Indigeneity that Indigenous women must replicate and embody. This label frequently relies on Western ideals of rehabilitation and femininity, which collectively reduce their ability to practice their culturally relevant sense of being (Martel & Brassard, 2006). However, it is important to recognize that the kind of codification that unfolds during reintegration marks the state's departure from explicitly imposing conditions over what constitutes as Indigenous female identity. For instance, while the Indian Act was a highly visible example of the state's attempts to limit Indigenous women's agency over their identity, the government now relies on environments where codification is less clear. In this way, the settler state can regulate and codify Indigenous female identity under the guise of being a neutral practice that is experienced by *all* formerly incarcerated populations, not just Indigenous women. That is, reintegration allows the state to justify their role in codifying identity as a generalized, objective carceral process imposed on all 'ex-prisoners' due to risk management, rather than a continued form of colonial regulation only over Indigenous women's identity.

By confining women's identity to a legal status and bureaucratic categories, the settler state expands opportunities to redefine what constitutes Indigenous womanhood. In turn, this

unprecedented authority increases the state's opportunity to regulate what they deem to be the appropriate practice of gender and Indigeneity, which essentially reduces the fluid, non-political, and evolving sense of being among Indigenous women. As Giddens (1984) recounts, agency is the ability of individuals to act, partake in independent decision making, and shape their social realities through and alongside the limits of social structures. This reflects the state's attempt to make reintegration a deterministic space, whereby Indigenous women feel that they have no other choice but to be confined to the state and its expectations during post-carceral life. This process is eliminatory in nature, as it is through reducing the agency Indigenous women hold over their identity that the state discreetly imposes boundaries on how women can express themselves, practice culture and engage in kinship connections. Ultimately, this constitutes a form of elimination, as the heavy restriction of Indigenous women's sense of being allows for greater control and threatens the erasure of how women practice their distinct cultural, social, and political roles in their community.

#### *Reintegration as an Expression of Settler Penal Nationalism*

While penal nationalism predominantly uses criminalization and incarceration to enforce its response to 'social threats', it is clear that this practice can also manifest during reintegration. Indeed, the symbolic violence of the correctional system falls under the realm of penal nationalism, as this violence is a mechanism used to prevent the upward mobility of individuals constructed as threats to the sovereignty of the settler state. Symbolic carceral violence is connected to penal nationalism in that the state relies on the invisible power and continued dominance of the prison during re-entry to delegate Indigenous women to a status that is not worthy of inclusion, and therefore, existence in settler society. This occurs through perpetuating social marginalization, reinforcing feelings of unworthiness, and establishing hierarchies that

confine Indigenous women to subordinate and dangerous positions. In doing so, penal nationalism engages in the process of creating deviant identities and subsequently erases them from society.

By imposing a lasting criminal/carceral identity, the state actively displaces Indigenous women from their communities and can strongly restrict their social participation. The overarching logic of this process is an attempt to erase Indigenous women from settler society and create a society that is void of a population that has historically and continues to be deemed an inherent threat to a white settler society. In turn, this erasure simultaneously reproduces and validates whiteness by attempting to remove any groups that either do not align with or fundamentally threatens the national identity of the state. In other words, the state legitimizes and sustains its foundation as a white nation by framing the control and elimination of Indigenous women, via penal processes, as necessary to protect the integrity and survival of the settler state. Altogether, a critical examination of reintegration and its impact on the identity transformation of formerly incarcerated Indigenous women reveals the settler colonial undertones embedded in the process of reintegration. This view of reintegration and its role in shaping Indigenous women's identity reminds us that settler colonialism, and the ongoing attempt to control and erase Indigenous peoplehood and sovereignty, are indeed an ongoing structure and not a historical event in Canada (Wolfe, 2006).

### **The Empowering Side of Reintegration – A Return to Resurgence and Community**

Despite experiencing profound difficulties in the space of reintegration, Indigenous women nonetheless resist the settler state's attempts to control their movements, and ultimately their identities, during re-entry after prison. As Foucault (1978) argues, resistance is a productive counter-conduct, whereby individuals engage in the refusal of institutionally managed identities

and, in doing so, test, shift and reshape social rules around subjection within power relations. This largely occurs through the practice of cultural resurgence, which collectively supports the self-determination of Indigenous women and their reconnection with community. While reintegration's juridical structure, processes, and state-enforced expectations reproduce settler colonial relations, it is not totalizing nor deterministic, as Indigenous women frequently create opportunities to (re)connect with culturally relevant ways of being *despite* ongoing settler domination. In this way, Indigenous women's experiences during re-entry demonstrate that the exile, or isolating oneself, from settler colonial spaces is not a necessary condition for resurgence to occur. Said differently, completely removing yourself from settler colonial spaces, such as the correctional system or parole, is not needed for resurgence to take place, as cultural revitalization *can* occur in these contexts (Tetrault, 2022). Moreover, the manifestation of resurgence holds gendered significance, as it is through dismantling the harms of negative self-perceptions and improved relationships with others that allows Indigenous women to reclaim ownership of their distinct and powerful sense of self.

Inherent to how resurgence unfolds in the lives of formerly incarcerated Indigenous women is the powerful role of kinship relationships. Through the establishment of kinship networks and relationships, Indigenous women in the data mentioned that they cultivated social relationships that sustained their socio-cultural interconnectedness. In doing so, their difficulties with individual responsiblization during reintegration were softened, as re-entry was practiced as a relational responsibility within the community. Furthermore, kinship was integral in the identity transformation of formerly incarcerated Indigenous women. With the love and care embedded in their relationships with others, women received the opportunity, support, and agency to (re)shape their identity during re-entry. Altogether, Indigenous women's resistance to

the carceral conditions they were enmeshed in, rooted in their reconnection with kinship relations, led to the subsequent resurgence of their identities. Ultimately, this highlights the role of kinship as a mechanism that supports the governance and self-determination of Indigenous peoples.

### *Resurgence Does Not Require Removal From or Exiting Settler Colonial Spaces*

Indigenous women's experiences during re-entry demonstrate that resurgence is a process that has the power to thrive despite unfolding within settler colonial institutional spaces, including during reintegration. As Indigenous resurgence seeks to reclaim what settler colonialism has erased, there remain popular beliefs that disengagement with settler society is a necessary precondition for Indigenous peoples to achieve their goals of cultural revitalization, and ultimately, liberation or decolonization. However, since resurgence is focused on the internal regeneration of Indigenous cultures, practices, and knowledge reproduction, it does not wait for nor demand the dissolution of the state or settler society to actualize Indigenous alternatives. Rather, resurgence remains committed to unnerving the settler values, norms, and behaviours that limit pathways for authentic Indigeneity to be practiced.

As Barker (2015) articulates, resurgence does not need to compete with Canadian sovereignty, as it is more focused towards supporting a daily existence that re-centers Indigenous livelihoods. In this way, resurgence often emerges in settler colonial spaces rather than through physical isolation from them, since “resurgence is inherently in contention with settler society, it also has explicit and implicit demands which is being contended with – namely, settler society and its dominant values” (Snelgrove et al., 2014, p.18). That is, resurgence is concerned with withdrawing from the violence of the settler state rather than from society altogether (Simpson, 2017). Resurgence does not require Indigenous peoples to completely exit from settler society to

attain the goal of cultural revitalization. This is especially relevant in the realm of reintegration, where Indigenous women's experiences reveal how resurgence is a daily practice produced in the same space that seeks to reproduce settler colonial domination. In this way, healing, revitalization, and resistance *can* be achieved within the seemingly deterministic reality of settler colonial carceral control. This recognition is crucial, as it shifts understandings of resurgence from an extreme and rare practice to a social and political reality that Indigenous peoples express through simple, everyday acts of renewal (Horn & Maracle, 2026).

The idea that resurgence is possible in settler colonial environments is highly evident in the way formerly incarcerated Indigenous women talk about their reintegration experiences. A prominent aspect of women's reintegration found in the data was the reciprocal support they received as they navigated post-carceral life. Importantly, this support occurred in varying spaces within settler society, such as treatment centers, halfway houses, and classrooms, rather than in isolated areas away from settler existence. These supports addressed a fundamental need among Indigenous women released from prison – a continuous system to rely on when navigating housing, educational, mental health and other related needs in post-carceral life. With these various necessities being met, Indigenous women were given the opportunity to engage in a wider exploration of their deeper personal, cultural and spiritual needs. As Patrica Tate (2018) highlighted, “there is a commitment by agencies, organizations and individuals in a specific area that are willing to work with you [Indigenous women] when they are released from an institution, that are willing to support you on your journey. That could be a medical team. That could be mental health. It could also include AA or some other addictions programming. All it amounts to is a group of people who have come together and said ‘We’re willing to support this individual’” (p.266). Collectively, Indigenous women experienced the benefits of relationality

and subsequently resurgent knowledges, relationships, and practices in spaces traditionally defined by and created for settler interests. Ultimately, Indigenous women engaged in resurgence-based processes *within* settler structures, thereby demonstrating the agency of Indigenous peoples to pursue cultural growth despite ongoing and enduring settler colonial relations.

Resurgence for formerly incarcerated Indigenous women unfolded during everyday acts of renewal that reaffirmed the grounded normativity of Indigenous peoples (Coulthard 2014). Inherent to this process were small-scale actions that encouraged women to re-establish their relationality and engage in cultural regeneration, with the overarching goal of practicing daily decolonization. This included storytelling, building mentorship-based relationships, and participating in cultural ceremonies such as smudging, drumming, and singing. In this way, these acts of resurgence were not large-scale but occurred on an individual basis to flourish the Indigenous inside. During reintegration, women were not concerned with being ‘accepted’ by the Canadian state as reformed individuals worthy of societal inclusion. Instead, they focused on cultivating relationships, returning to their communities, and reconnecting with cultural traditions and practices. For example, Indigenous women actively sought to understand their histories, their purpose in this lifetime, and transform how they viewed and presented themselves to others in their communities. As Chantel Huel (2023) reflected, “I remember Kookum Bonny sharing the story [We’re Eagles, Not Chickens!] when I lived in Pathways. We learned it in a circle – within a traditional healing program house. I learned things about myself, light bulbs were going off constantly. It gave me a greater understanding of who I am and what I can do” (p.13). Their central intention was to understand and subsequently practice what it means to be an Indigenous woman according to their cultural and communal values. Women did not submit

to the settler state's demands of how their reintegration experience should look, thereby reinforcing their own personal self-determination in shaping how their post-carcerall lives would be lived. As a result, Indigenous women actively responded to settler colonial violence that sought to dictate how formerly incarcerated Indigenous women should act, behave, and exist in settler society. Overall, these acts of resurgence pushed back against settler colonial attempts of destroying Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and relating.

### *The Intersection of Feminism, Decolonialization and Resurgence*

Indigenous women's experiences with reintegration exemplify the relationship between resurgence, decolonization, and feminism. As various scholars such as Gaudry and Corntassel (2014), Elliot (2018), and Alfred (2023) have argued, resurgence and decolonization are intertwined concepts, as they both seek to dismantle the harms of settler colonialism. It is through decolonizing one's mind that Indigenous peoples engage in acts of resilience that retain Indigenous culture and ways of being, which ultimately advances the self-determination of Indigenous peoples. However, it is crucial to unpack how Indigenous feminism(s) play a key role in the intersection of resurgence and decolonization, especially in relation to Indigenous women's reintegration into community. While feminism as a general framework is concerned with advocating for the equal treatment of women, decolonial and Indigenous feminism argues that patriarchy and colonialism play a co-constitutive role in maintaining the oppression of Indigenous women (Mack & Na'puti, 2019). This is attributed to the role of patriarchy, which systemically displaced Indigenous women from their historical social and political roles within Indigenous societies to reinforce settler colonial domination (BlackDeer, 2023). With this recognition, decolonial feminism actively seeks to unsettle settler colonial relations that sustain

gendered inequality to facilitate the resurgence of Indigenous women's culturally relevant sense of being (Lugones, 2010).

In the data, Indigenous women noted during their reintegration how they recognized how settler colonialism has played a key role in undoing and disrupting gender relations in Indigenous communities. For instance, through relationships with Elders, many noted how they gained specific knowledge and understanding of how women's historical roles shifted due to settler colonial violence. This was complemented with anti-colonial curricula that highlighted how Indigenous peoples have been confined to the inaccurate labels of deficient, incapable, and powerless to serve the goals of settler colonial containment and erasure. Through such educational activities, Indigenous women gravitated towards cultural practices, relationships, and protocols in order to address the harms perpetuated by settler colonial violence and its impact on their womanhood.

At the same time, their acts of resurgence were also expressed as acts of refusal to accept gendered impositions by the state. With the settler state attempting to restrict Indigenous womanhood to a deviant and irreparable subjectivity, Indigenous women refused the state's continued control over their identity. This occurred through the (re)discovering of cultural practices through kinship relationships, which in turn gave women the opportunity to understand their purpose in life, rethink their negative self-conceptualization, and engage in self-love and confidence to reclaim their historically powerful roles in their communities. Central to this process was Indigenous women deliberately turning away from the settler state and towards themselves to renew their womanhood and ways of being. These acts of refusal, therefore, centred on Indigenous women not ceding control to the settler state over how they were recognized and subsequently treated. In doing so, they actively took control over their sense of

being without reliance on the state – a core feature of Indigenous resurgence. In other words, the gendered expressions of resurgence that were adopted by Indigenous women were not reactive but *generative*, as they worked to create a new reality for Indigenous women in settler society. Altogether, this process reinforced that Indigenous women are not solely passive victims of settler colonialism but rather possess the agency to confront and disrupt attempts of domination over their personhood.

### *Kinship – A Social Relationship and a Form of Indigenous Governance*

Key to the expression of resurgence during reintegration is the role of kinship, which functions as both a social relationship and a political expression of Indigenous governance. As women recounted, kinship played pivotal roles in providing informational, emotional, and practical support to alleviate barriers during their reintegration. In this way, kinship served as a social relationship through which women experienced interconnectedness with their community in varying capacities and social locations. At the same time, kinship operates as an inherently political entity that supports Indigenous forms of governance. Indigenous women's experiences during re-entry highlight how kinship relationships create roles in the community that reflect grounded normativity while also shaping the socio-legal structure of Indigenous societies. To expand, Indigenous women's kinship networks, which included fellow incarcerated women as well as Elders, were powerful forces. Indeed, such relationships encouraged and actively cultivated healing of their past traumas, addressed their low self-esteem, and provided support as they navigated post-carceral life. As a result, Indigenous women became more involved in their communities and felt connected to their cultures. Indeed, many women felt immense support and guidance to (re)connect with their roles as mothers, sisters, grandmothers, peers, and teachers that they lost when they entered the correctional system. As Rubby Harry (2025) articulated,

“every role I have – mother, worker, elder, business owner – is grounded in culture and teachings that helped me come home the right way”. Such a return to specific kinds of community-oriented cultural roles and responsibilities is attributed to the non-hierarchical power that flows through kinship relationships, which reminds women of their non-carceral, and therefore non-settler based, value in society.

Kinship, ultimately, plays an integral role in the sustenance of grounded normativity – the values embedded in Indigenous ways of being (Coulthard 2014)– which remains foundational to Indigenous governance. Indigenous governance, at its core, is concerned with the self-determination of Indigenous communities and the reproduction of healthy relationships with oneself, their kin, and the land. Kinship remains critical to Indigenous governance and legal practices, as reciprocity, shared responsibility, and mutual legal obligations toward one’s relations help Indigenous communities ensure safety, predictability, and a society that engenders holistic wellbeing (Napoleon, 2013). In simple terms, Indigenous governance through kinship relations is lived and socially reproduced rather than enforced through hierarchical (criminal) law enforcement. The ongoing role of kinship is evident in the experience of formerly incarcerated Indigenous women, where kinship relationships allowed women to uphold their reciprocal obligations to their community, engage in community-led processes that promoted healing and responsibility, and offer relational support to newly released Indigenous women. This was the experience for Amber Christie (2019), who stated, “I’ve been helping other women just released, a few of whom are pregnant, find housing and get stability in their lives. I’ve run two NA Narcotics Anonymous meetings in Mission at the Union Gospel Mission building – I open the doors, make the coffee, put the chairs away” (p.65). In doing so, Indigenous women were able to participate in shared responsibilities and collective decision-making without the involvement or

dependence of the settler state. Overall, based on the data, it is clear that reintegration is not a totalizing space that is overtly defined by settler colonial carceral control and surveillance. Instead, *despite* these ongoing structural carceral realities, Indigenous women have been able to engage in resurgent cultural practices, establish important kinship relationships, and find opportunities to reconnect with their communities and family.

### **Ongoing Tensions and Struggles – But the Stronger Power of Kinship on Identity Transformation**

As the previous discussions have demonstrated, the space of reintegration can be understood as contentious, contradictory, and defined by both carceral control *and* Indigenous relationalities. However, it is important to stress that, in the data I found, kinship relationships were described as having the most significant impact, as they deeply informed and shaped the identity transformation(s) Indigenous women experienced during reintegration. With carceral based relationships and conditions keeping them linked to the prison, Indigenous women cultivated important relationships that drew them towards their more culturally grounded sense of self. This was made possible by kinship relationships, which had an integral role in guiding them back toward the identity that was either stripped, denied, or lost during their carceral histories. With this in mind, Indigenous women's experiences during this process highlight that identity transformation does not occur overnight. Rather, it requires ongoing connection, reflection, and practice to become (re)connected to one's role and overall purpose in life. As Sheri Pranteau reflects (2022), "even in the hardest times, I have to get up and appreciate the day and be grateful and, you know, we [Indigenous women] could change the world one day at time. I believe that if we keep pushing, that we will heal each other" (p.89). Importantly, the identity transformation of formerly incarcerated Indigenous women reflects ongoing conceptualizations that a return to oneself is connected to the broader goal of decolonizing political systems.

### *Kinship as Love and Care*

Kinship is not merely a relationship defined by role modelling or friendly encounters but is oftentimes expressed as a form of reciprocal love and care. Due to the emphasis on interconnectedness within varying Indigenous cultures, kinship relationships have become a mechanism through which collective well-being is maintained. While kinship in Western and Indigenous contexts both appreciate the familial nature of the world, it is important to recognize their distinction in meaning and significance. Kinship in Western thought is dominated by understandings of the nuclear family and operates and holds limited significance in social life. Indigenous societies, by contrast, encompass more expansive meanings of what constitutes kinship (i.e., non-blood relatives can become kin), and takes on a political/legal significance as it is a function of governance. In this way, Western understandings of kinship operate in a more individualistic and limited socio-cultural manner, with relationships serving more of an objective function (i.e., the separation of politics and social life) and therefore not tied to a sense of legal obligations to others. Indigenous kinship, on the other hand, is inherently socio-political due to its role in reaffirming solidarity, thereby requiring collective care, responsibility and holistic support to meet communal rather than individual needs. As kinship is a reciprocal obligation, acts of compassion are inherent to its basis, as it is through the giving and receiving of unconditional care that relationships are cultivated, connection is established, and belonging is maintained (Tynan, 2021). Therefore, kinship is made and subsequently practiced among Indigenous peoples through expressions of love, such as sharing, teaching, and empowering. Importantly, caring within kinship is expressed through acts of providing *literal* support and ultimately life necessities (i.e., goods, services, safety, food, and shelter). The love and care embedded in kinship is reflective in Indigenous women's reintegration experience, specifically with the relationships cultivated via service delivery. These relationships embodied love and care

as they were dedicated not only to providing varying forms of support to women but were also dedicated to helping women find themselves and transform their identities. Kinship, ultimately, created the foundations for where, why, and how Indigenous women's identities transformed during reintegration.

### *Transformation Process Via Kinship*

The identity transformation that Indigenous women experienced during re-entry was not an instant or simple process. Rather, it was comprised of a series of actions aimed at (re)creating women's identity. As Indigenous women recounted, reintegration was a particularly harsh experience. It impacted their sense of self due to the immense stigma, sense of unworthiness, and disconnection they experienced after incarceration. However, these negative sentiments about their identities were not completely accepted by Indigenous women, since many refused to accept or adopt these settler colonial tropes about Indigenous women. In the data, this was directly attributed to the power of kinship relationships, but more specifically, positive reinforcement from others who reminded them of their inherent worth. This helped Indigenous women contest negative perceptions they held of themselves as they navigated their post-carceral life.

Indigenous women's sisterhoods were an important kinship network in their identity transformation process. The core marker of women's identity transformation was their recognition that their identity is not tied to the state. By rejecting carceral identities and instead engaging in resurgent practices, formerly incarcerated Indigenous women effectively came to understand that their identity is intimately tied to their families, communities, and wider kinship networks— especially their sisterhood of fellow incarcerated women. With the support of their band of sisters, Indigenous women were provided guidance in challenging fixed, stereotypical, or

misleading understandings of their reputations that are steeped in settler colonial social and political discourses. This occurred through words of affirmation from their carceral sisters who reinforced the idea that Indigenous women's roles in life exist beyond the carceral system. Further, they were encouraged to heal from settler colonial harms and adopt their Indigenous identities both for themselves and their community. Ultimately, formerly incarcerated Indigenous women were both encouraged and supported in their journey to turn inwards towards themselves and find their womanhood in accordance with their cultural values. This was significant in engendering identity transformation, since Indigenous women were exposed to non-settler worldviews of how their identity could be embodied, lived, and practiced during reintegration. In other words, Indigenous women's kinship with fellow incarcerated women served as gentle reminders that while the state often governs how Indigenous female identity looks, Indigenous peoples continue to have the agency to resist and reimagine how they want to embody their personhood.

Alongside sisterhood, Elders play a fundamental role in supporting formerly incarcerated Indigenous women's identity transformation. Elders were critical in the personal (re)discovery of self, since they provided teachings on historical Indigenous womanhood to remind women of their inherent identity. This cultural knowledge was significant, as Elders provided Indigenous women with a safe space and opportunity to either learn or reconnect with their womanhood without settler colonial intervention. As a result, women felt confident to unpack their trauma, address their internal biases, and subsequently adopt and embody important cultural values – actions that are often difficult to achieve under state-backed programming. To clarify, while carceral programming centres on control and surveillance, it also provides a space for Indigenous women to meet Elders and fellow incarcerated women, who in turn support each other on their

reintegration journey. In this way, programming remains a place of tension and contradiction, where state attempts at authority are met and confronted with the power of community building and solidarity. The contradictory ideology of programming is crucial to recognize, as this environment *can* provide Indigenous women with the support system, cultural practices and knowledge to transform their identity. For instance, teachings provided by Elders encouraged Indigenous women to find who they are meant to be in this lifetime. In other words, Elders transmitted cultural knowledge to formerly incarcerated Indigenous women not out of a contractual or financial obligation, but rather, to support their healing, improvement, and happiness during reintegration.

The love exhibited by Elders, oftentimes through teachings, was also supplemented with ceremonies. As noted in the data, cultural ceremonies were powerful, as they provided Indigenous women with the opportunity to weave their knowledge of female identity into ceremonial practice. Through singing, drumming, and storytelling, Indigenous women worked together with Elders to understand and ground their female identity. Through such meaningful practices, they were able to reaffirm their personhood. This was the experience of Rubby Harry (2025), who stated, “I was at Surrey Pretrial Services Centre when I found a donated, dusty drum sitting unused and covered in dust. I cleaned it and placed it where it could be honoured, but I didn’t play it. Cultural practice from my community meant I had to stand behind it for a year — to learn from it, to listen and to show respect before I was ready to bring its voice back. When I was finally ready to drum, it felt like the spirit of that drum was drumming me, too. It reminded me who I was and where I came from”. While this process did not result in the immediate transformation of their identity, it nonetheless provided Indigenous women with the language, tools, and guidance to begin their return to their culturally relevant sense of self. In this way, the

love and care Indigenous women received through their kinship relationships, particularly with Elders, can be understood as the ‘prep work’ that Indigenous women engage in to cultivate a holistic identity transformation after contact with the carceral state.

With mentorship from Elders, women received—often for the first time in their lives—contextualization of their social histories, which helped them reframe their previous actions and behaviours. This reinterpretation of lived experiences occurred through Elders reframing women’s outcomes within larger discourses of settler colonial violence, trauma, and marginalization, rather than their individual shortcomings. As an anonymous woman (2023) at Buffalo Sage Wellness House reflected on her relationship an Elder: “I just kind of have more sense of who I am in a sense and where I came from and how I got to be where I am. Like, I have more understanding because before I really didn’t know too much about it” (p.17). This practice was influential as women recognized that their criminal histories were not *the* defining component of their identity, but rather, indicative of larger histories of settler colonial harm experienced by Indigenous peoples more generally. In this process, Indigenous women were able to lift the settler veil on their personhood, which revealed the missing aspects of their identity, such as their roles as mothers, aunts, relatives, community members, and teachers. This further supported their identity transformation, as they started to reframe and resituate their purpose in life beyond their criminal involvement and outside of the confines of the correctional system. That is, Indigenous women recognized their capacity to shift away from their ‘deviant/incarcerated’ identity to one that reflected a return, or recalibration, towards their culture. That is, to become a relational, loving, and powerful woman. Overall, kinship relationships helped Indigenous women move away from the deterministic identity imposed by the settler state.

### *Significance of Identity Transformation of Indigenous Women*

Through their identity transformation, Indigenous women actively pushed back against the ongoing criminalization and codification of female identity in the space of reintegration. As identity is frequently created, learnt and negotiated in the correctional environment, the settler carceral state plays an influential role in associating an identity to Indigenous women that they deem appropriate (i.e., regulated and monitored) (Pulis et al. 2021). This practice extends the power of the settler state beyond formal institutional spaces, notably prisons, and into the community, as the state continues to influence how reintegration is embodied and experienced among Indigenous women. In turn, this supports the state's attempt to regulate Indigenous identity/sense of being to attain its goals of reducing Indigenous presence within society.

However, as reflected in the data, Indigenous women emphasized that they relied on their kinship to push back against this confined labelling of their identity. In doing so, women engaged in practices of resurgence, recalibrating toward their true self and identity. This embodiment of cultural revitalization is significant as it shifts characterizations of Indigenous women as passive victims who must accept the conditions of the state to exist in settler society. Rather, women's identity transformation and subsequent resurgence exemplify that Indigenous women have always resisted in the face of settler colonial attempts of domination that try to limit their self-determination. Although programming was often inaccessible or lacking in availability, Indigenous women nonetheless took the initiative to form kinship networks that supported their agency in transforming their identity. This was seen in their ongoing connections with Elders and fellow incarcerated women who served as support systems when Indigenous women were faced with adversity as they navigated their sense of self during reintegration. In this sense, women did not fully accept the conditions of the settler state when discovering their identity outside of

prison but instead explored opportunities that reaffirmed their sense of cultural womanhood. This is a missing aspect in reintegration scholarship, as the focus tends to center on the discrimination, suffering and helplessness Indigenous women experience, rather than their agency and ongoing resistance to settler colonial harms to their personhood. Therefore, Indigenous women's identity transformation invokes a shift in how reintegration is conceptualized. Rather than operating as a definitive space that perpetuates women's oppression, reintegration should be seen as a contentious space marked by settler attempts of control and kinship-based resurgence.

Similar to the tension that exists when characterizing the outcome behind reintegration, there remain divisive opinions on what identity transformation embodies. Some cultural critics and postcolonial scholars may argue that identity transformation of formerly incarcerated Indigenous women is essentialist, or that returning to some sort of 'lost identity' is reductive (Benhabib, 2002). Central to this critique is the concern that identity exists in some abstract form outside of human experience. Within this line of thinking, identity is conceptualized as a fixed, rigid, and recoverable entity that is not fluid amongst social beings. As a result, identity transformation risks becoming essentialist, or as a 'return' to something that one never possessed, which reinforces the notion that Indigenous identity can be captured, distilled, and measured in a universal way (Coulthard, 2014). In turn, this increases the likelihood of Indigenous peoples being expected to conform to a set of values, traditions, and notions of authenticity that limit open exploration of the self.

Such a perspective, however, ultimately fails to recognize the larger political and historical context that warrants and underpins the process of identity transformation in the first place. This is attributed to the fact that Canada attempted to destroy these identities, thereby making identity transformation an inherent aspect of revitalizing Indigenous presence in the settler state. With

this in mind, identity transformation should not be understood solely as a return to a ‘static’ identity, but rather as a strategic form of survival amongst Indigenous women. While Indigenous women may sometimes rely on a fixed Indigenous female identity at the beginning of their reintegration to resist eliminatory logics on their personhood, this is not to say that they rely on a confined set of expectations over their sense of self. Rather, it is through relational processes and communal connection that Indigenous women embody culturally grounded identities that remain fluid and constantly evolve as they progress in their post-carcerall journeys. In doing so, identity transformation becomes an embodiment of resurgence as women negotiate, reaffirm, and express their identities in ways that confront settler colonial conditions within the space of reintegration.

Moreover, identity transformation represents a larger collective project among Indigenous peoples that seeks to decolonize political systems and mechanisms that uphold settler colonial authority. Although finding oneself is pivotal for Indigenous women during reintegration, it is important to recognize that it is not the end goal of resurgence. Rather, it is part of the ongoing project of decolonizing settler society, whereby communities who are collectively engaged in resurgent practices are in a stronger position to challenge and disrupt ongoing settler colonial relations (Coulthard, 2014). In other words, it is not helpful to position Indigenous women’s identity transformation as an individual journey of self-discovery, since it is inherently tied to the ongoing decolonial struggle of Indigenous peoples. To clarify, the kinds of resurgent practices and relationships that unfold within kinship relationships, where finding oneself is a likely outcome, is ultimately part of a broader project of establishing stronger relationships, as well as a sense of community among Indigenous peoples. In turn, such communities are well prepared and culturally strong to continue the ongoing anti-colonial struggle. It is important to understand that strength in this context is not physical, but is deeply tied to collective unity, sense of self, and

well-being (Sium et al., 2012). Strength centres on building courage and solidarity within Indigenous communities to address settler colonial harms and make way for resurgent pathways. Therefore, resurgence via kinship and identity transformation during reintegration creates stronger communities for the ongoing decolonial struggle.

In the context of Indigenous women's identity transformation during reintegration, a strong link emerges between kinship, resurgence, and decolonization. As women recounted, their transition from carceral-based identities towards culturally relevant identities often resulted in the fostering of meaningful connections between Indigenous peoples. Through this process, women cultivated kinship networks that alleviated the common strain of responsabilization experienced during reintegration. This support is critical, as it transforms reintegration (and social life more broadly) from an individual burden into a relational framework marked by care, shared responsibility, and guidance. Adverse outcomes, therefore, such as isolation, lack of understanding of one's purpose in life, and helplessness, were averted through the continued support and guidance women received from their kinship. As a result, Indigenous women experienced an immense sense of belonging and subsequent integration with their community.

This connection is integral, as it is through increased interconnectedness that Indigenous women become stronger individuals. As previously mentioned, strength is not concerned with increased bodily function but rather focuses on improving the inner power among Indigenous peoples to engage in resurgent-based practices. For Indigenous women, meaningful connections allowed them to effectively understand that they are not alone or individually responsible for confronting settler colonial attempts of control. Therefore, Indigenous women increased their confidence to navigate and challenge varying settler colonial structures, assert their culturally relevant identities and resist intimidating attempts of psychological settler control. This

recognition also pushed Indigenous women to pay forward the kinship and knowledge they received during their identity transformation to the next generation of incarcerated impacted women. In doing so, Indigenous women not only become stronger individuals who understand their power, but also, individuals who support their fellow community members in realizing their potential to confront colonial harms. Through this process, women subsequently engaged in resurgence, as they invested in moving away from a politics of state recognition towards prioritizing the revival of traditions and values that reaffirm the blossoming and survival of Indigeneity. Overall, this created a community that became a strong, united front in the decolonial struggle against the settler state. This solidarity is pivotal, as everyday acts of resilience advance the autonomy of Indigenous societies to challenge structures and social dynamics that prevent the return of cultural freedoms – the key intention of decolonization.

#### *Identity Transformation, Decolonization and Abolitionism*

Lastly, Indigenous women's identity transformation experiences exemplify that in order to enact meaningful changes to the correctional system that improve the outcomes of Indigenous peoples, structural changes in the settler state are required. In this sense, abolition is largely relevant to this argument, since the dismantling of structures that perpetuate systemic violence is innately tied to decolonization within Indigenous societies. As both projects seek to emancipate individuals from environments that exert settler colonial power, abolitionism and decolonization can be understood as interconnected forms of theory and praxis for Indigenous communities (Motluk, 2024). Decolonization is a guiding pillar of abolition, as it restores Indigenous self-determination and ensures that abolition is not simply a state-created reform, but a return of Indigenous peoples' role in managing conceptions of justice (Horn & Maracle, 2026). In turn, abolition supports decolonization by targeting systems such as the prison that sustain the settler

colonial status quo, thereby creating space for Indigenous-led justice approaches that reaffirm self-determination.

However, if abolitionism does not engage with Indigenous peoples' right to administer their own legal system, the movement ultimately regresses its ability to liberate Indigenous peoples from settler colonial control. As Tuck and Yang (2012) powerfully argue, "decolonization is not a metaphor" (p.3). Therefore, the prioritization of decolonization is fundamental to abolitionist intentions as it envisions a future whereby Indigenous people retain jurisdiction over their laws and the right to eliminate settler institutions such as the prison in place of Indigenous spaces that promote healing. Said differently, abolitionism is a tool that provides Indigenous peoples with the opportunity to engage in modes of governance that reflect their own values, traditions and beliefs. Collectively, this is important in the context of Indigenous women's identity transformation and reintegration experience. Through decolonial abolitionism, Indigenous women evade state-led punishment that reaffirms their 'Other' identity in return for access to Indigenous legal orders that reaffirm their sense of belonging despite criminal activity. In doing so, Indigenous women are given the opportunity to engage in healing practices that improve connection to their community and culture. This is crucial as power is shifted away from the state and into the hands of Indigenous women and their broader communities to exercise their personhood. Overall, while abolition will not occur overnight in the Canadian settler state, it nonetheless provides an avenue for Indigenous peoples to slowly, but effectively, erase carceral institutions that limit their self-determination. With an increased recognition, valuing and incorporation of decolonization, abolitionism offers a framework through which Indigenous women can rebuild relationships, identities and systems that support Indigenous peoples' ongoing resistance against settler colonialism.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter provided an analysis of formerly incarcerated Indigenous women's identity transformation during reintegration. I argue that identity transformation can be situated in a zone of conflict between settler colonial domination and resurgence and decolonization. Settler colonialism manifests through the state's reliance on whiteness, socio-spatial exclusion and penal nationalism within reintegration. As a result, Indigenous women often face decreased opportunities to connect with a culturally relevant sense of being as they are exposed to eliminatory logics as they navigate their personhood during re-entry. Despite attempts of settler control, Indigenous women nonetheless engaged in resurgence to revitalize their non carceral-based identities. Central to this process was women's (re)connection to cultural practices that reaffirmed their role in this lifetime, flourished their Indigenous inside, and improved their confidence to embody a non-regulated identity. These acts, therefore, served as a direct response to the settler state's attempt to limit women's self-determination over their sense of self.

Importantly, while this nexus of tension exists in the space of reintegration, this thesis argues that kinship plays the most significant role in transforming Indigenous women's identities post-carceral release. Kinship is foundational to Indigenous women's identity transformation as relationships provide the strength, solidarity and ongoing support for women to both imagine and practice an identity that aligns with Indigenous understandings of womanhood. In doing so, kinship supports the resurgence and decolonization efforts of Indigenous women and peoples more broadly to create a future that reaffirms Indigenous sovereignty over their existence. Altogether, this analysis contributes to ongoing academic discussions that seek to exemplify the complexity of reintegration, rather than reinforcing the common positive/negative binary found in carceral re-entry scholarship.

## **CONCLUSION**

This thesis examined the identity transformation experience of formerly incarcerated Indigenous women in Canada. For Indigenous women, identity transformation represents a transition from viewing oneself as a perpetual carceral subject towards practicing a culturally relevant self that reaffirms one's purpose in the community. I argued that while women wrestle with the tension between their carceral-based and cultural identities, it is the love embedded in their kinship networks and relationships with others that supports their identity transformation during the reintegration process. Through acts of care, kinship networks, which included Elders and sisterhoods, played a significant role in introducing, supporting, and sustaining Indigenous women's return to their cultural identity. Kinship, therefore, served as a basis for resurgence, empowering Indigenous women to engage in practices that flourished their Indigenous identity. However, this project also recognized how settler colonial carceral logics continue to inform Indigenous women's experiences as they navigate their personhood, identity, and relationships during the reintegration process. That said, I found that Indigenous women nevertheless persisted and prevailed in such settler colonial sites. In this way, I demonstrated that reintegration is not a deterministic space defined by the inevitable power of the settler state, but rather, it is a complex environment in which Indigenous resurgence confronts, disrupts, and challenges settler colonial harms that negatively impact women's sense of being.

### *Key Arguments*

When discussing post-carceral life, Indigenous women often referred to the mechanisms embedded in reintegration that made them feel perpetually linked to a carceral identity. Women stated that the correctional system's lack of care towards adequate reintegration preparation weakened their independence during release. As a result, women felt obligated to navigate reintegration in accordance with the state's rules and expectations. Given the difficulty of

meeting such obligations, women often returned to precarious conditions that kept them involved in the revolving door of incarceration, thereby reinforcing their identity as ‘prisoners’. Moreover, the intense responsabilization to navigate re-entry barriers without state assistance was viewed as an additional mechanism that kept women connected to their carceral identities. Without ongoing state support, Indigenous women experienced hardships in confronting the stigma, institutional disconnection and isolation that reinforced their carceral histories. Consequently, women felt a weakening of their personhood as they could not envision, nor embody, a sense of being outside of prison.

Indigenous women recounted the difficulties in building connections with their communities, which contributed to the internalization of a carceral-based identity. This was attributed to ongoing state surveillance and control during reintegration. This worked to limit their agency when returning to their communities and kinship networks and, in turn, limited the revitalization of their cultural identities. As a result, Indigenous women felt limited in their abilities to grow in their communities and reconnect with their cultural sense of self as they felt demoted to a carceral citizen class. Overall, formerly incarcerated Indigenous women recognized the continued power of the carceral state in the seemingly ‘open’ space of re-entry. These findings demonstrate the ongoing role of carceral logics in the identity transformation process during reintegration, which seek to govern the lives of Indigenous women after prison. In this way, transcarceral authority represents larger settler colonial discourses of whiteness, socio-spatial expulsion, and elimination in the Canadian settler state. Through its surveillance strategies and techniques in the space of reintegration, the state inadvertently constructs Indigenous women as violations of white standards, thereby justifying the need for their removal

to preserve the integrity of settler society. These practices advance ongoing settler colonial relations by reducing Indigenous women's presence in settler society.

However, Indigenous women also referenced the reciprocal support, kinship networks, and practices of Indigenous alternatives that (re)connected them to a culturally relevant identity. The emotional, informational, and practical support women received during reintegration was positioned as a form of healing that gave women the comfort needed to shift their negative sense of self/being. Said differently, support within service delivery provided Indigenous women with the knowledge, confidence, and resources to confront and upend their carceral identities and recognize their potential to generate a culturally rooted sense of self. In addition, women discussed the powerful roles of their kinship networks of Elders and sisterhoods as they navigated their personhood outside of prison. These kinship networks motivated women to embody their cultural identities and as guidance systems they could rely on as they began to reaffirm their sense of self.

Lastly, Indigenous women touched on their experiences with practicing Indigenous alternatives that reaffirmed their purpose outside the confines of the correctional system. These alternatives centered on flourishing the Indigenous inside and helped women disrupt settler colonial logics during reintegration to make space for cultural perspectives of their identity to be internalized. Notably, this process occurred due to the ongoing support women received from their kinship and communities, which encouraged them to 'come into' / embody an identity they often did not possess or understand before their time in prison. Altogether, Indigenous women engaged in everyday acts of renewal that promoted resurgence in their development of cultural identities. Through this process, women also engaged in decolonial feminism to unpack and confront gendered impositions on their personhood by the state to reclaim their cultural

womanhood. Central to this identity transformation were again the kinship networks of Indigenous women, which not only served as a support system but also as a form of governance that reaffirmed women's roles and reciprocal obligations in their communities during reintegration.

#### *Future Directions in Research*

Although this thesis provides new insights into the identity transformation experience of Indigenous women, additional avenues for future research on this topic remain. Firstly, studies should include a more diverse sample of Indigenous women when examining the relationship between identity and reintegration. Due to difficulties recruiting participants, this thesis relied on archival data, in which First Nations women were heavily represented in the analysis. As a result, Inuit and Métis women were underrepresented in this thesis. This omission is important to acknowledge, as Inuit and Métis women have experienced distinct forms of gendered violence that have created differing experiences with their identity both inside and outside of the prison system. Future research, therefore, should include a larger sample that adequately represents all formerly incarcerated Indigenous women in Canada to gain a more accurate understanding of the identity transformation process during reintegration.

Similarly, future studies should focus on different locations across Canada where identity transformation occurs for Indigenous women. Prairie provinces such as Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Alberta, where Indigenous women are highly represented in prison and subsequently engage in reintegration most, would offer an opportunity to compare how identity transformation occurs in these spaces with the central provinces. Moreover, future research would benefit from engaging in a longitudinal study that follows Indigenous women from their carceral release to community reunification for an extended period of time. This research design

would be important for further capturing the complexities and tensions that exist during identity transformation, as this process is not instant but rather an evolving journey for women. Finally, research should further examine the relationship between kinship and resurgence during reintegration for formerly incarcerated Indigenous women.

### *Contributions to Knowledge and Final Claims*

Engaging with both settler colonialism *and* kinship-based resurgence during the transformation Indigenous women experience during their reintegration, my thesis shifts conceptualizations of reintegration away from a ‘positive’ or ‘negative’ binary. This contribution is significant as it demonstrates that post-carceral life is not a linear, simple path, but a multi-dimensional journey comprising of complex experiences. My thesis highlights that settler colonial dominance is not the defining feature of reintegration for Indigenous women and instead emphasizes the tension between settler colonial carceral logics and the importance of cultural resurgence during re-entry. By unpacking the complexity of identity transformation, this thesis showcases the often-hidden side of reintegration for Indigenous women – their ongoing resistance in carceral environments. Critically oriented criminological research tends to position formerly incarcerated Indigenous women as victims of state violence due to an overemphasis on their experiences with oppression, harm, and defeat during re-entry. However, this thesis strived to shift this framing to demonstrate how Indigenous women defy and challenge settler colonial carceral logics. This recognition is crucial, since (dis)missing Indigenous women’s resistance and resurgence does not give credit to the historical and ongoing struggle Indigenous women have engaged in within settler society. In this way, growing attention to the agency of Indigenous women who have had contact with the criminal justice system pushes broader society to recognize, appreciate, and center Indigenous resistance in conversations of criminal justice.

Overall, this thesis adds complexity to the discussion about Indigenous peoples' contact with the criminal justice system. Current knowledge surrounding Indigenous encounters with the criminal justice system is fairly one-dimensional in that the focus centres on overrepresentation, oppression, and surveillance. Given these realities, prison and carceral abolition is logically understood as the fundamental response to challenge the inequities of the system. However, abolitionist discussions can often overlook the value in how Indigenous women are engaging in resurgence and building important relationships *inside* settler colonial carceral institutions and spaces. As a result, abolition often remains rigid in how they talk about the future of Indigenous peoples' encounters with the criminal justice system. That is, there is a tendency to prioritize the dismantling of settler carceral structures, while being inattentive to the resurgence that can and does emerge in these environments. This thesis, therefore, encourages abolitionists to be less dismissive of Indigenous encounters and histories of struggle. By demonstrating the political significance of resurgence in the broader struggle for self-determination, this thesis challenges abolitionists to think differently about Indigenous encounters with the criminal justice system. In particular, it calls for greater recognition of the nuances highlighted in this research, encouraging abolitionist scholarship to appreciate the significance of resurgence and its value in conversations about what justice looks like for Indigenous peoples.

To conclude, this thesis stresses the importance of Indigenous communities remaining involved in the reintegration experience of Indigenous women. As this project demonstrated, kinship holds significant power in promoting the healing, decolonization and blossoming of the Indigenous inside for formerly incarcerated women. In doing so, the community plays an active role in guiding and supporting women as they navigate their personhood outside the scope of the carceral state. At the same time, there remains limited integration of Indigenous communities in

women's carceral release planning due to the state's reluctance to cede control over the structure of reintegration. In order to prioritize community involvement during reintegration, the state must transfer key decision-making authority to Indigenous communities to create and sustain reintegration according to Indigenous worldviews. This will not be completed overnight but rather requires ongoing commitments by the state to center Indigenous presence in the re-entry space.

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