Where the Roots Remember: Reclaiming Addiction Recovery, Indigenous Epistemology and Storywork: A Personal Journey into Land Memory through Stories, and Visual Art Narratives as a Pathway of Healing

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Where the Roots Remember: Reclaiming Addiction Recovery

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my father, Linwood V. Sireech (egup). Had you been able to share your story, it would have illuminated the depths of your inner pain and provided the healing you so merited. I am profoundly grateful for the wisdom you imparted to me and for the strength you offered, enabling me to navigate this path. Your life, labor, and spirit continue to guide my hands and heart. To my mother, Velma J. Sireech (egup), thank you for giving me life and love. You were not just my mother but my best friend and companion. Your absence aches in my heart every single day. Your resilience taught me to endure with grace, showing me how possibility flourishes through love, patience, and unwavering presence. To my sister, Nonie R. Sireech, your journey of recovery stands as a profound teaching for us all. Your stories are invaluable resources for helping others. Your commitment to sovereignty reflects strength, discipline, and a deep devotion to life. You embody the spirit of a Warrior Woman, and your path holds healing for many. To my brother, Judd V. Sireech, I hold you in my thoughts and prayers each day. I sincerely hope that you find peace and sobriety in your life. Always remember how deeply you are loved; you are the heart of this dissertation, and without you, it would not exist. Finally, to my sister, Suzette L. Sireech (egup), this dedication is for you. I know that had you remained on this earth, you would have been a beacon of light in many lives and accomplished remarkable things for our family. I carry you with me always, in memory, in prayer, and in every step I take forward.

I also dedicate this dissertation to every participant who shared their story with courage and care. Your willingness to speak, remember, and reclaim your narrative made this work possible. I honor the trust you placed in me. May it remind others that their stories carry power and that healing remains possible.

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your love and strength that empower me to put words to this dissertation. In those moments of challenge, your grace and encouragement to persevere have profoundly impacted my ability to keep moving forward. Thank you for being my foundation and for inspiring me every step of the way

ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines addiction and healing within Indigenous communities through the lens of Indigenous Storywork. It draws on land-based knowledge and visual art narratives as methodological and theoretical approaches, with a particular focus on storytelling as a means of reclaiming narratives about addiction. Grounded in lived experience, family memory, and relational accountability, the study conceptualizes addiction as a collective and historically situated condition shaped by colonial violence, intergenerational trauma, and disruptions to kinship, culture, and belonging. This research resists dominant deficit-oriented frameworks by centering Indigenous stories as sources of knowledge, authority, and meaning.

Personal narratives are positioned alongside stories shared by Indigenous family members and community participants, who discuss themes of substance use, recovery, loss, and survival. Indigenous Storywork guides both the methodology and analysis, affirming storytelling as a powerful act of narrative reclamation that restores voice, dignity, and relational responsibility. Visual art practices, including beadwork, photography, and digital collage, extend storytelling beyond written language, engaging embodied and affective ways of knowing.

This study advances an Indigenous epistemology-grounded approach to addiction research, counseling practices, and educational leadership, demonstrating how storytelling supports healing by reshaping meaning, restoring relationships, and affirming Indigenous ways of knowing as a pathway to healing.

Keyword: Indigenous Storywork, Addiction and Recovery, Narrative Reclamation, Storytelling as Method, Intergenerational Trauma, Relational Accountability, Indigenous Healing

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Releasing the Seed- Opening Prayer

Creator, Grandfathers, Grandmothers, and all those who walked before us, I come before you in a humble way and with a grateful heart.

I thank you for this day, for this gathering, and for the opportunity to speak these words. I ask for your presence in this space. Let this dissertation begin in a good way, with honesty, clarity, and respect. Help me speak from the heart, from memory, and from the truths carried by my family, my community, and the stories entrusted to me.

I lift up my family, those who are here in spirit and those whose love continues to guide me. I honor the participants whose courage and openness made this work possible. May their stories be received with care, dignity, and deep listening.

Please steady my voice and calm my heart. Let my words carry purpose. Let this work reflect healing, responsibility, and love for our people. May this space hold kindness, wisdom, and understanding. May what is shared here honor the land, honor our Ancestors, and honor the path of healing for those still finding their way home.

I offer these words with gratitude.

I begin Chapter 1 with a prayer because it offers the most honest way of beginning. It is both the foundation and the lens through which my dissertation takes shape. This approach reflects how Indigenous knowledge is lived, embodied, and carried forward through generations. This approach enables me to start from a place of truth and memory, rather than theory, situating my research within the lived realities that inspired it. It opens a doorway for the reader to understand the emotional and spiritual roots of the work, the moment when my research questions first took form through personal experience, family, and community.

The decision to be this way carries profound significance. Through Indigenous Storywork, storytelling grounds knowledge in relation to place, spirit, and people (Absolon, 2022; Archibald, 2008; Kovach, 2009; Smith, 2012). By writing planting the Seed, I position myself within the research rather than outside of it, showing that knowledge arises through relationship, reciprocity, and reflection. This functions as both a framework and a recurring metaphor, weaving together art, memory, and methodology (Cajete, 2000). It reveals how my practice as an artist and counselor merges with my identity as a Northern Ute woman, shaping how I approach recovery, learning, and healing with the context of addiction research.

Beginning this dissertation in this manner fundamentally influences its overall tone and structure. It highlights the principle of relational accountability (Wilson, 2008), reminding both the reader and me that this study goes beyond mere detached observation. Instead, it fosters a sense of connection and responsibility, challenging Western academic conventions that often privilege objectivity and distance.

Employing life experience stories as a methodological foundation provides a powerful voice to those whose narratives illuminate their journeys of survival and resilience in overcoming addiction. These individuals understand that sharing their stories is not only a means of personal expression but also a gift that may inspire and assist others facing similar battles. In acknowledgment of their courage and the reciprocity of our relationship, I intend to offer them a medicine pouch as a symbol of my gratitude and recognition.

This approach centers Indigenous epistemology, which values the coexistence of emotion, spirituality, and intellect (Battiste, 2002; Cajete, 1994). I believe this methodology operates in cycles, mirroring the organic nature of healing, embracing what matters most, revisiting past pain, and ultimately transforming it through a deeper understanding. By adopting

this format, I aim to invite the reader into a meaningful relationship, preparing them to accompany me respectfully and thoughtfully through the unfolding chapters of this work. Together, we embark on a journey that is both engaging and profoundly significant.

Statement of the Problem

Across the United States, Indigenous people live within an enduring crisis of addiction, grief, and loss that extends far beyond what statistics reveal. American Indian and Alaska Native communities experience the highest rate of drug overdose mortality and substance-related emergency department visits in the nation, reflecting patterns of loss that repeat across families and generations (Barnes et al., 2005; Spencer et al., 2023). These data mark more than public health outcomes. They signal lived realities where addiction shapes memory, kinship, and daily survival within Indigenous households.

This crisis is rooted in persistent structural inequities. Suicide rates among American Indian and Alaska Native people remain more than twice the national average, while chronic underfunding of the Indian Health Service continues to restrict access to sustained and culturally grounded care (Spencer et al., 2023). Rural isolation, economic hardship, and limited behavioral health resources reinforce cycles of harm within Tribal Communities (Smye et al., 2023). These conditions emerge from a colonial history that fractured Indigenous systems of relationships, spiritual continuity, and collective well-being.

Addiction within Indigenous communities reflects centuries of imposed disruption. Forced removal, assimilation policies, and systemic racism have reshaped relationships to land, language, and kinship, leaving enduring wounds carried across generations (Sherman et al., 2025). Historical trauma persists through bodies and families as living grief. Duran's discussion of Butz's clinical work offers a metaphor that resonates within Indigenous contexts, describing

colonial violence as an initiating wound that becomes internalized and self-perpetuating within the spirit (Duran, 2019). This framing reveals how historical domination embeds itself within contemporary experiences of addiction, despair, and disconnection.

These harms emerged through deliberate state policies intended to erase Indigenous presence, language, and systems of knowing. Many Indigenous families continue to carry pain without a shared language for its origins. Silence, endurance, and emotional restraint become learned practices of survival, passed down across generations as a form of protection rather than a choice (Brave Heart, 1998; Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998; Brave Heart et al., 2011; Weiss et al., 2023). When we examine addiction from both historical and contemporary perspectives, healing extends beyond the individual and impacts family history, community dynamics, and shared responsibility.

The problem lies in how addiction within Indigenous communities is addressed through systems that are detached from land, kinship, culture, and lived experiences. In Utah and the surrounding regions, state and local responses rely on deficit-based data, fragmented services, and externally imposed frameworks that fail to address the complexities of addiction. These approaches prioritize distance over relationship and efficiency over listening. As a result, they silence Indigenous knowledge and limit the ability of tribes to shape programs grounded in their own histories, values, and collective responsibilities to one another.

Yet this narrative does not rest in abstraction, numbers, or detached accounts stripped of relationships. I do not center faceless data dispatched from land and kin. Still, evidence matters because it names the depth of harm across Indigenous homelands. The crisis reaches far beneath surface indicators. As Abigail Echo-Hawk argues, decolonizing data helps restore culture and strengthen communities. Echo-Hawk emphasizes, “When we are invisible in the data, we no

longer exist. Too often, data is collected and presented in a way that perpetuates the narrative of poverty and need, painting a portrait of disparity and deficit" (Echo-Hawk, 2017, p. 34). Her words draw attention to how measurement practices shape reality, influence policy, and perpetuate colonial harm by severing people from their place and story.

My understanding of this problem is deeply rooted in my personal experience. Growing up in a household affected by alcohol use, I witnessed firsthand how family memory and inherited silence intertwined with expressions of love and care. Dysfunction and absence coexisted alongside these familial bonds, creating a complex tapestry of relationships. Addiction was not some distant specter; it was a constant presence woven into the fabric of our daily lives. I saw how my father's struggles with alcohol were interwoven with his tenderness, his unwavering dedication to work, and his profound desire to belong. He carried the weight of responsibility for our family, demonstrating his commitment through hard work and expressing love in the ways he knew best.

Yet, amidst this struggle, addiction quietly seeped into our home, shaping our relationships with emotional distance and lingering unspoken grief, reminding me that the pain of addiction is often masked by the very love that seeks to heal. This juxtaposition of presence and absence further illuminates the importance of recognizing the stories behind the data, stories that deserve to be heard and understood. This personal history reflects a broader and urgent problem within Indigenous families and communities. Trauma rooted in violence, displacement, racism, and systemic oppression does not remain contained within a single lifetime (Wesley-Esquimaux & Smolewski, 2004).

In my role as a substance use disorder counselor, I often notice these same patterns repeating. Many individuals struggle with emotions that feel larger than their own lives. Grief

surfaces without a clear source, and anger arises without the ability to express it. Too often, people receive messages framing addiction as a personal failure, disconnected from their history or personal story. When recovery is viewed in isolation from these narratives and contexts, the healing process feels incomplete. However, when we acknowledge historical roots, we replace blame with understanding, allowing recovery to transform into an act of remembering and reconnecting.

In our quest to understand addiction, we must delve beyond the individual experience and embrace the roots of stories that permeate our families and communities. This study seeks to illuminate the struggles of addiction alongside the erasure and distortion of Indigenous narratives within the realms of research, policy, and treatment. It compels us to ask: What might healing truly resemble if we prioritized our own stories? How could the landscape of recovery transform if we centered Indigenous knowledge systems at the forefront of our approach?

By integrating Indigenous Storywork and visual storytelling, this study aims to reclaim our narratives and honor the profound wisdom embedded within our lives, our art, our grief, and our resistance. In doing so, we pave the way for a more holistic and compassionate understanding of healing, one that acknowledges and celebrates the resilience of our communities and the complexities of our shared experiences. Through this lens, we aim to address the issue of addiction and redefine the dialogue surrounding it, fostering a deeper connection to our stories and the collective memory they embody.

Planting the Seed - Pay-keeh Nukuh-ni (Come and Listen)

Indigenous Storywork is a powerful approach that encourages researchers to recognize their place within the topic they're studying. This approach emphasizes holistic engagement with both the subject matter and our own narratives (Archibald, 2008). In my pursuit of a doctoral

degree, I explored addiction within Indigenous communities, using the Storywork methodology, weaving together personal experiences and those of others who have battled addiction. By reflecting on our journeys, we can articulate the intricate dynamics of addiction and its deep-seated impact on individuals and communities, both before and during their experiences with substance use.

This study poses considerable challenges, necessitating a thorough examination of our identities and the pathways that have led us to this vital area of inquiry. This work contributes to academic discourse while also sharing the incredible stories of resilience and strength that I have witnessed in the recovery journeys of individuals within Indigenous communities. These narratives embody the spirit of recovery and serve as beacons of hope for others grappling with similar struggles.

Through Indigenous Storywork, we can highlight the resilience demonstrated by those who have faced addiction, illustrating how their stories can offer solace, understanding, and encouragement to others. By showcasing the transformative power of storytelling, this research seeks to deepen our collective understanding of addiction and its societal implications, ultimately fostering a sense of community and support for those on the path to recovery.

At the onset of my doctoral journey, I found myself struggling with profound questions surrounding addiction and its pervasive effects on Indigenous communities. Articulating these issues proved to be a considerable challenge as I sought to navigate the complex interplay between addiction and the historical contexts that have shaped our lives. My search for meaning was deeply personal. I was driven by a desire to help my family and community unravel the intricate ways in which addiction has become entrenched in our existence.

The memories of family members lost to substance abuse and alcohol have long overshadowed my life, leaving a haunting absence that reverberates through our collective consciousness. In many ways, these losses have been normalized within our communities; we often accept them as an unfortunate aspect of our realities without pausing to interrogate the underlying factors. This normalization has obscured the necessity of reflecting on the roots of addiction and its connections to our familial histories.

Consequently, as I embark on this academic path, I am compelled to examine not only the societal structures that contribute to addiction but also the cultural narratives that surround it. By doing so, I aim to foster a deeper understanding within my community about how these issues are interwoven with our experiences, thereby paving the way for healing and advocacy. This exploration represents a commitment to reclaiming our stories and confronting the challenges that continue to affect our lives.

Over time, it has become clear that many of us share a collective struggle. We find ourselves drifting through an entrenched silence, shaped by oppression and trauma, which hinders our ability to understand one another and ourselves truly. This realization has profoundly influenced my work and motivated me to adopt Indigenous Storywork as a central component of my study (Archibald, 2008). Indigenous Storywork is vital because it honors the narratives within our communities, providing a robust framework for exploring the complexities of addiction. This approach allows us to engage in an ontological exploration that reveals the generational and intergenerational impacts of addiction, extending not just within our families but also throughout our tribal communities. By using the principles of Indigenous storytelling, I aim to create spaces for healing and dialogue, reconnecting us to our shared experiences and histories. In doing so, I hope to nurture a deeper understanding of addiction that resonates with

our lived realities, ultimately empowering our communities to reclaim their narratives and chart pathways toward resilience and healing.

Honoring our Stories

This study features powerful stories of resilience and recovery from Indigenous individuals. While I share a snippet of these stories here, Chapter 4, titled "Sharing Our Stories," delves deeper into these narratives, highlighting the strength found in shared experiences.

I begin with my own story.

Golden Leaves - Firewood Day

At the age of 10, my sister and I had weekly chores, helping our father cut firewood. We were raised with a wood-burning stove, which provided warmth for our home during the winter. This method allowed my parents to save money rather than installing a gas line. They preferred using wood from cottonwood trees, claiming it burned particularly hot.

Our days began with my father gathering and cleaning his old chainsaws, both secondhand and assembled from various parts he had scavenged from the backyard of one of his friends in town. This became our routine, as my sister and I took on this responsibility while our little brother was just a year old. I looked forward to our time with my father; it was the only occasion he would engage with us and give us guidance without the influence of alcohol.

My father drove an old red truck with a wooden rack in the back to hold the freshly chopped wood. He often spoke about his favorite spot for gathering firewood, called "Red Bridge," where a grove of tall cottonwood trees flourished. In the fall, the leaves shimmered under the sunlight, glowing with hues of gold. The distant hum of a chainsaw drifted through the air. My sisters and I escaped into our world for a fleeting moment, imagining a life beneath the canopy of golden cottonwoods, a life untouched by chaos and dysfunction. In our minds, we lived

in a grand mansion, free from the need to chop wood for warmth. However, the spell broke when our father called us to start loading the cut logs into the truck. With a sigh, we set aside our fantasies and returned to reality.

Growing up with an alcoholic father deeply affected our self-esteem and sense of identity. We wrestled with feelings of guilt and shame about our poverty, which left us vulnerable to developing substance use issues as we got older. My older sister encountered these challenges first, and later, in his teenage years, my younger brother began drinking at just 14. My sister also struggled with substance use until she found sobriety seven years ago.

Not long ago, I drove home from work on the back roads, crossing the Red Bridge and the Duchesne River. As I did, I noticed the cottonwood trees adorned with vibrant golden leaves, indicating that autumn had fully arrived. This beautiful scene reminded me of my father and the cherished moments we shared. It also prompted thoughts of my brother, who, at 48, continues to struggle with addiction, now battling substance and alcohol use disorder. I find myself worrying about whether he has enough firewood to keep our parents' old home warm.

I recall how this tree comforted us during the winter, its intense fall colors fading from greens to radiant gold. In the wild, cottonwood trees are known to colonize areas susceptible to flooding and soil erosion. Though this land may appear ordinary, the seeds that blossom into these trees carry an extraordinary story of healing and resilience. They embody a history woven with the struggles of addiction and substance use. In this space, we serve as the unseen roots that nurture and uphold this powerful narrative, reminding us of the strength that can emerge from even the deepest challenges.

My Story

As the years in this program progressed, so did my life. This academic journey evolved into a pursuit of knowledge, ultimately becoming a spiritual awakening. My research journey has led me to connect deeply with my Spirit, unveiling profound layers of understanding. As I worked through the writing stages of my dissertation, I realized that engaging with stories has been a crucial part of my healing process. This experience required me to address the fragmented pieces of myself and confront the unspoken elements that lingered within. As I nurtured my connection with my inner self, the dissertation began to take form, allowing the stories to intertwine into a meaningful and cohesive narrative.

I contemplated how best to share my story—one that is deeply connected to the land, memory, and my relationship with the Cottonwood tree, which serves as a core metaphor throughout this work. Presenting my story in the introduction feels essential, as it allows me to be open about my lived experiences and how they shape my role as an Indigenous Substance Use Disorder Counselor, practicing on the lands of the Ute Indian Tribe. This transparency feels vital to both my narrative and my practice.

My passion for becoming a Substance Use Disorder Counselor stems from the experiences I share, reflecting the intertwined past and present of our family. Every struggle we have encountered has shaped my understanding, fueling my fervent desire to help others overcome their own challenges. I wonder: How did we arrive at this crossroads, and what forces conspired to shape our destinies?

Every story we tell is intricately connected to our family and community, where our experiences intertwine in deeply personal ways. In sharing my narrative, I approached it with great care, honoring the relationships that shape my journey and recognizing the varying levels

of privacy held by those around me. I must not oversimplify or diminish my own experiences. Instead, they serve as both the catalyst for my inquiry and the foundation of my research into Indigenous Storywork. This journey continues to deepen my understanding of healing and the nuanced ways in which Indigenous knowledge manifests.

My Sister

In this dissertation, I undertake a profound exploration of my older sister, Nonie Rose Sireech's, life. She has graciously agreed to share her story, which will provide a poignant platform for her to express her struggle with addiction and the circumstances that have shaped her path. Despite her impressive accomplishments in various professionals, Nonie has long been affected by unresolved trauma, a wound that continues to impact her life. Her experiences are invaluable to this research, as they shed light on the complex challenges encountered in addiction recovery. In sharing her reflections on navigating withdrawal without medical assistance, she provides a raw and unfiltered look at the resilience required to confront such adversity.

My Brother

Transitioning to my younger brother, Judd V. Sireech, I find that his narrative becomes the heartbeat of this study. An extraordinary writer with a profound capacity for reflection, Judd’s story is rooted in pain, resilience, and hope, a connection to our invisible roots that animates my own narrative. It is through his journey, marked by both struggles and triumphs, that I draw inspiration, illuminating the familial bonds that have shaped us and the shared challenges we face. Without Judd, this story may have remained in the shadows, denied the recognition it so desperately deserves. However, despite the brilliance of his spirit, Judd continues to struggle with addiction and alcohol use, a battle that weighs heavily on my heart. In sharing his journey, I hope to illuminate pathways for those like Judd who find themselves

entangled in their own battles, haunted by the past. His story serves as a guiding star for others, even as he continues to struggle with his addiction. I am reminded that there is still hope for us to bring my brother home, and I refuse to give up on him. Life is a reminder that even in the darkest moments, a flicker of hope awaits discovery, a beacon of possibility that can lead us toward healing and redemption.

In 2025, tragedy struck when my brother's girlfriend lost her life to a drug overdose. He wasn't by her side when it happened. Upon hearing the news, I witnessed a heartbreaking transformation in him. His body went rigid, the color drained from his face, and the weight of sorrow settled heavily on his shoulders. The anguish in his eyes was palpable, a striking embodiment of a love inextricably intertwined with addiction.

Their relationship was a tumultuous journey, characterized by a volatile mix of affection and hostility. This complexity often devolved into moments of abuse, underscoring the painful realities they both faced. Each of them was ensnared by the relentless grip of substances, which not only distorted their bond but also tainted their shared experiences with shades of pain and longing. As Knot (2019) poignantly captures, "Alcohol was always there. It sat between us like a third body, shaping the way we spoke, the way we fought, the way fear entered the room" (p. 72). This focus on alcohol illustrates how it became a central figure in their relationship, influencing their every interaction.

Their love unfolded in a cyclical pattern, where drinking triggered conflict, sharpening arguments, and transforming moments of clarity into episodes of pain. Yet, amidst this chaos, love lingered as a quiet undercurrent. It was sustained by loyalty, longing, and the persistent hope that someday, tenderness would prevail over the violence wrought by addiction. In their

struggle, we can see the profound complexities that arise when devotion becomes entangled with destructive habits, creating a landscape of both profound connection and deep despair.

I received the news while working on a course assignment, my mind trying to grasp words and concepts that suddenly felt trivial. In an instant, something inside me broke. I sat at my computer, overwhelmed, and wept. I cried for the children left behind, for the empty spaces that would follow them like shadows throughout their lives. I cried for my brother, whose grief often lurks in silence, emotions tightly folded within his heart. I mourned for countless Indigenous women, their lives extinguished quietly in the shadows of substance use, their stories often reduced to mere statistics.

In that moment of reflection, I felt her kindness linger in the air, a gentle spirit that loved her children fiercely. I don't believe she fully understood the depths of her addiction or that a path to healing lay beyond her sight, much like many of our Indigenous women, who also navigate a world that often overlooks their struggles. This profound loss has sparked a question within me, echoing in both my work and my spirit: How do we truly listen to the land? How do we hear what has always been speaking to us? In sharing my story, I write these words for Gina, in remembrance and in love.

My Mother

In this dissertation, my mother's presence is also reflected in the stories, dreams, and memories I share, as I recall them today. This thoughtful and respectful choice is made to honor her life, resilience, and the strength she embodied. She was the heart of our family, deeply connecting us to Ute culture through her language and nurturing presence. Her voice resonated with the rhythm of our community, and her hands skillfully created beautiful beadwork around our kitchen table. Each bead she threaded represented a meaningful lesson in patience, care, and

the beauty of creation. Each day now unfolds beneath the quiet weight of her absence. My mother's passing has changed the rhythm of my life. I navigate this journey without her physical presence, yet I feel connected by her spirit. She took great pride in my journey, often thinking about how proud my father would have been, too. In her final days, she visited my home almost every day. Sadly, I was often caught up in work and study and sometimes missed the tenderness she showed through her loving gestures. Her presence endures beyond the physical world. I feel her spirit deeply connected to my steps, guiding my thoughts as I write, remember, and return to the land that nurtured us both. As I do this work, I carry with me the spirits of my mother, father, younger sister, and all family members who have passed on. Though unseen, their essence stays within me, as constant as my breath, shaping how I listen, learn, and grow.

My Father

My father's presence is also evident throughout this study, as it explores the context of lost kinship, our connection to the land, and the interconnection of story, dream, and family memories. His life has significantly shaped who we are, and his struggle with addiction continues to echo across generations. I share his story not to criticize but to recognize the complexities of family trauma, addiction, and resilience as transmitted through what I understand as epigenetic and intergenerational memory, the blood memory alive within us all. As Valaskakis (2005) suggests, "blood memory refers to the social and cultural memory that persists despite colonial erasure, representing a connection to the past built through shared relationships and collective experiences" (p. 215). My father's story cannot be reduced to just his addiction. He was insightful, innovative, and deeply rooted in his identity as a Ute man. To honor him, I must hold both his brilliance and his struggles in balance. Through Indigenous Storywork, I

thoughtfully engage with his narrative, viewing storytelling as a method that promotes healing and restores relational harmony (Archibald, 2008).

My Younger Sister

In 1994, my family faced an unimaginable loss when my father and younger sister, Suzette, died in a car accident caused by a drunk driver. She was only 24 years old. My sister left behind two young children—a 3-year-old daughter and a 6-month-old son. The burden of this tragedy weighed heavily upon us, as if it could shatter our very souls. It marked a profound turning point in our lives, forever altering the course of our existence. She exists only in my memories and dreams, as that is how she continues to grace my thoughts. In those ethereal moments, I envision her wandering through an alternate world of spirits, where love transcends the boundaries of life and death.

The effects of their deaths continue to linger, layering trauma and sorrow that test our resilience. Grieving together has become essential to our healing, reminding us of the value of community and the strength of storytelling within our culture. As we honor the memories of our loved ones, we also find ways to support one another, weaving shared experiences into a narrative that ultimately builds strength and hope during grief.

During their funeral, my mother placed a cut branch from a rosebush, nearly three feet long and covered with sharp thorns, inside their coffins. She said it was to stop the tragedy from continuing, to let the pain end there. I remember her explaining this to me, both of us quietly weeping on the side. At that moment, I understood her act not only as mourning but also as a ceremony. She was offering something living to the spirit world, asking nature to intervene where human words had failed. My mother's use of land serves as a bridge, narrowing the gap in her kinship ties and illustrating how profound, imaginative love for family can enable an

individual to become deeply interconnected with a place. This relationship reveals the intricate interplay between memory, identity, and the environment, highlighting the role of emotional bonds in cultivating a sense of home (Absolon, 2022; Baldy, 2018; Cajete, 2002; Campbell, 2022; Smith, 2012).

Loss and Ceremony

In Indigenous ways of knowing, such gestures are never separate from the land. As Kawagley (1995) explains, relationships extend beyond people to include all living beings and the natural world. "All things are related and interconnected" (p. 9). The rosebush, though cut, still carried its medicine, the thorns standing as protectors, the stem holding memory. Archibald (2008) writes that stories, and by extension, symbolic acts, carry spiritual power when performed with intention and love. My mother's act was a story in motion, a prayer made visible through nature and love.

This offering reflected what Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013) calls the grammar of intimacy, the acknowledgment that plants, trees, and even thorns possess spirits. By placing the rosebush within the coffins, she invited renewal, asking the land to hold what was too heavy for our hearts. The thorns were boundaries, saying "no more," while the stem whispered of life continuing. In her own way, my mother created a balance between grief and renewal, between the human and the natural, between endings and beginnings. It was her way of ensuring that our family sorrow would become part of the earth's healing cycle, not its repetition.

The memory of my mother placing that rosebush branch became a teaching that stayed with me, shaping how I came to understand ceremony, loss, and the land's role in holding grief. In my dissertation, the Cottonwood tree carries this same thread of meaning. Like the rosebush, it stands as both witness and healer, rooted in the cycles of death and renewal. My father often

turned to the Cottonwood when he needed strength, cutting its branches for firewood or shade, always speaking of its spirit with quiet respect. He would say that the Cottonwood burns hot and long through the long winter nights, that its fire holds patience and steadiness even when the wind howls outside. I remember watching him tend the fire, the glow of the embers lighting his face, and realizing that he, too, was in conversation with the trees.

The actions of my father, his hands on the wood, alongside my mother's gesture of offering a rose to him and my sister, have shaped the way I write, remember, and dream. The Cottonwood tree, always present in the background, is also a part of this narrative. Within its roots and leaves, I find the lessons they have imparted. The land continues to speak through memory and story, guiding my work as I explore themes of addiction, healing, and the sacred relationship between people and the living world. This presence is rooted in my family's story in the heart of my dissertation.

Honoring my parents means approaching this work with reverence and bravery. It represents the most tremendous respect I can offer. This task is an extension of love. When I sit down to write, I remind myself that sharing these stories is both a duty and a sacred act. Even when the process is complex, it becomes a space of gratitude, a way to reconnect with my parents and the land that holds our memories.

Stories of Lived Experience - Broken Branches and Kinship

As I delve into the realm of Indigenous Storywork, I am compelled to honor the memory of my loved ones through the power of storytelling. I long to create a narrative where the land becomes our teacher, guiding us through lessons that patiently await our understanding, sometimes over decades or even centuries. The land carries memories, holding onto them as we forget ourselves in the rush of life. This spiritual connection deepens when it is rooted in place,

when stories are returned to us, cultivating relationships rather than fostering isolation (Archibald, 2008; Baldy, 2018; Cajete, 2000; Deloria, 1999; Kimmerer, 2013).

Throughout this dissertation, one of the central elements is my relationship with my father and how I see him, then and now. Writing this dissertation has brought me closer to him in ways I did not expect. For so long, I wanted a better relationship with my father, one that felt safe and full of understanding. I used to imagine a father figure like the ones on shows like The Brady Bunch, someone from a sitcom. I held that longing quietly, thinking the chance had passed. Through this study, I have begun to see him more clearly. I feel his presence in the rhythm of these words, as if he is sitting beside me, patient and listening.

Stories carry what our conversations could never hold. They remind me that healing comes through remembering. This closeness feels different now; it is gentler. I no longer search for the version of him that alcohol took away. I am learning to see the father who worked hard, who laughed easily, and who carried his pain without a language to name it. This is what I mean when I speak of the disruption of kinship, broken, yet still capable of being repaired.

Writing feels like the process of Kintsugi, the Japanese art of mending broken pottery with powdered gold. The cracks are not hidden; they become part of the story. In the same way, this work feels like mending the past, acknowledging the fractures, filling them with light, and finding beauty in what remains. Healing emerged through acts of care, storytelling, and responsibility rather than a return to an untouched past, reflecting Indigenous teachings on survivance and continuity (Methot, 2019; Simpson; 2017; Vizenor, 2008). Through this process, I am learning to love, even when broken, and still hold its shape.

Throughout my doctoral journey I have had the opportunity to critically reflect on the complex aspects of my father's life, the disruption of kinship, and the profound ways in which

his beauty and fragility shape my understanding of trauma, love, and silence. It has become clear to me that this exploration exemplifies my use of Indigenous storytelling as a meaningful research methodology, allowing me to articulate my lived experiences. How do these narratives influence our collective understanding of resilience and vulnerability? Here is an example of how I reflect on the past and practice collective healing.

The Mask We Wear: Remembering My Father through Story

My father was a very handsome man. I remember one instance vividly: my mother was yelling at him about a Native woman who had been looking at him at the grocery store. In hindsight, I realized I always admired how my father looked. Even my friends used to comment on how handsome he was. However, I do not think I fully understood how much I thought of him this way. I was always on the outside looking in, yearning for him to turn and see me. He was a light-skinned, mixed Ute man—one his peers called "Pretty Boy" in high school. He spoke Ute fluently and was not very tall, yet he carried himself with a strong, expansive presence. His energy could be torrential, swinging between extremes—sometimes positive, but often negative. As a child, I came to understand this as his mask, the one everyone saw when he was not drinking. However, most of the time, that mask was replaced by something darker.

When he drank, he transformed into a dangerous, hungry bear, consuming pieces of himself—and me—with every bite. It was not physical violence alone; it was a spiritual devouring, a slow, deliberate destruction. Alcohol coursed through him like blood, fueling the wounds we both carried. I often wished for physical injuries instead because, at least with those, the pain might eventually subside. Trauma and alcohol share a complex relationship that lingers and festers. It is a bond that does not heal easily, a wound that leaves no visible scars but cuts just as deeply.

This story is not typical, but it is the one that comes to mind as I write this dissertation and reflect on the importance of stories. In my dream, I see my father as he was when he was young and still handsome. I perceive him as powerful, ancestral, and liberated, and I feel beautiful too. Our beauty does not need healing to shine; it only requires recognition. I gently lower my mask onto my lap. He can see me now (Sireech, 2024).

This writing marks the first time I have spoken about my father and our relationship while exploring how stories hold both pain and tenderness within their folds. This exploration laid the foundation for this study, in which storytelling transitioned from remembrance to a form of healing. Through it, I came to understand addiction as a spiritual journey shaped by histories of loss, resilience, and reconnection with our kinship. Indigenous Storywork, as described by Archibald (2008), guided me to see that stories live as family. They help us understand who we are and where we come from. They lead us home when the world forgets how to see us.

As a child, I sensed that my family was seen as different. My father, a mixed-blood Ute man, carried both pride and burden in his light skin. His presence held contradictions: strong, humorous, and full of spirit, yet shadowed by the pull of alcohol. Our home rested between tribal land and a white town where we were reminded of the boundaries that were not ours to build. I did not yet know the word for what we were living through, but later I would recognize it was systemic racism. The low expectations placed upon Indigenous families shaped how I viewed myself and what I thought was possible. However, even within that environment, I made a quiet promise to become someone who would carry our story forward and bring my little sister with me as I grew up. Those promises have guided

my path and continue to shape my purpose as a mother, wife, artist, counselor, researcher, and storyteller.

In my work today, I help others find meaning in their alcohol and substance use and connect to their histories. I ask them to see how their relationships, especially those with parents, continue to shape their sense of self. This practice mirrors my own healing. Ball & Moselle (2013) emphasize that reclaiming father-child relationships is part of cultural restoration, as colonization disrupted traditional fathering roles through forced assimilation and disconnection from the land. Similarly, Reinhardt et al. (2012) notes that the bonds between Native fathers and daughters are rooted in spiritual belonging, responsibility, and the transmission of cultural knowledge. Reflection on my father through this lens allows me to see his addiction to alcohol as part of a larger pattern of survival in the aftermath of generational trauma.

After my father's passing, I began to uncover the deeper roots of his addiction. I learned that he had suffered physical abuse as a child at the hands of his stepfather, an experience that marked his early life with fear, powerlessness, and isolation. Childhood became a space of survival rather than safety, profoundly influencing how he learned to endure pain, to remain silent, and to cope without the language to articulate what he carried. The trauma entered his life long before alcohol did.

If I could speak to my father now, across time and age, I would tell him this: You deserved protection. You deserved care. You deserved a childhood free from fear. Help was available, even if it was hidden from you. Healing did not require silence. Growth did not require endurance through harm. What happened to you was violence, and survival shaped the rest of your life.

My father never spoke openly about the physical abuse he endured as a child. Silence functioned as both shelter and weight. Instead, my mother carried his story. She shared fragments over the years, careful and restrained, offering glimpses into a childhood shaped by injury, fear, and emotional abandonment. Through her words, I learned to understand his alcohol use not as failure or moral weakness, but as a response to harm inflicted by someone entrusted with his care. Alcohol served as a refuge. It softened memory. It quieted the pain that remained unnamed and untreated, as well as the disruption to kinship.

As Momaday (1968) eloquently states, "Some of my mother's memories have become my own. That is the real burden of the blood" (p. 89). Through my mother's storytelling, her memories have entered our lives as knowledge carried through our relationship. This speaks to inheritance as a responsibility rather than possession. Memory is passed down across generations through intimacy, care, and survival, reminding us that we carry history within our bodies (Hogan, 2001; Momaday, 1968; Valaskakis, 2005). It prompts us to decide how these memories will live on through our choices, relationships, and acts of healing.

Connection to the Land/Cottonwood Tree and Stories

I grew up in a small town where Cottonwood trees lined the streets and parks like quiet guardians. Their branches arched above us as my cousins and sisters rode their bikes or walked to the corner store. They offered refuge in the heat of summer and stood bare but steady through winter, their forms providing warmth even when stripped of leaves. I never imagined those trees would shape the core of my dissertation, yet they have followed me through every turn of my life. The Cottonwood became a keeper of memory, standing through the dysfunction, resilience,

and loss that shaped generations of us. Its roots hold our shared story, one of survival and endurance.

When I look at a Cottonwood tree, the first thing that draws me in is its weathered bark. The twisted branches reaching toward the river seem to be in prayer. It stands where few others dare to grow, rooted in eroded soil that would turn most life away. To me, the Cottonwood has been more than just a tree. It has been a witness to our lives, even if we did not realize it.

As a child, I watched a documentary that explained how to determine a tree's age by its rings. Each ring showed layers of drought, abundance, and survival. However, to see these rings, the tree had to be cut open. That unsettled me. I wanted the Cottonwood to survive; it kept its secrets safe beneath the bark. Even then, I realized that the deepest stories often stay hidden, quietly carried within the tree's body, just as they are within us.

In late spring, we watched the seed storms drift through the air. The cotton seeds floated like snow, light and aimless. "It is like a fairy tale," my younger sister would whisper. Those seeds had no say in where they landed; they simply surrendered to the wind and trusted what came next. In their drifting, I began to see a reflection of my own story, a scattering before the roots take hold.

It took me years to realize that addiction is not a sign of weakness, but a story of separation from land, from kin, from culture, from belonging. These insights came gradually, shaped by my work, my brother's struggle, and stories shared within our community. This work reflects a return to the land and kinship, emphasizing that healing is truly a collective journey.

Addiction and the Cottonwood

In this study, the Cottonwood tree serves as both a method of inquiry and a guiding metaphor, shaping my understanding of how to remember, listen, and create. Addiction reflects a

personal struggle rooted in history. It grows from the same soil of displacement and silence that our Ancestors endured. Healing does not mean erasing scars. It means learning to grow around them. The Cottonwood shows her wounds openly, yet she remains tall. Our stories, though steeped in pain, reveal the truth that what we carry is not shame, but the undeniable strength of survival. Addiction, rather than creating a void, outlines the contours of lost connections. The scars we bear become woven into our strength.

In Joy Harjo's poem "Speaking Tree," the Cottonwood takes on the role of a living relative, embodying memory, grief, and renewal. Harjo (2015) gives this tree a voice that recalls what humanity has forgotten, the original language of the earth and the relationships that once guided us. Harjo's words resonate with the rhythm of prayer, reminding us that every living thing carries a story, even in moments of silence. I incorporate Harjo's work into my literature review, using it as both a poetic and theoretical anchor that connects Indigenous epistemology, relational accountability, and land-based healing.

As Kimmerer (2013) beautifully writes, learning from teaching requires humility, reciprocity, and listening to the more-than-human world. Drawing from the land as a teacher and ancestral memory as a guide, the Cottonwood leads us to knowledge and spiritual guidance for understanding the metaphor of healing from addiction. How do we use Indigenous Storywork to teach lessons from the land? Perhaps this occurs without our awareness.

I composed this Storywork titled "The Cottonwood Woman: When Nature Spoke to the Nuche Ute" to honor the profound relationship between the land and Indigenous peoples, especially during times when the world feels distant. I represent the Cottonwood as the Mother Tree because she embodies a relative, an Elder presence, and a witness to our histories. Her roots

hold the memories of our people, and her leaves carry our prayers. She remembers us, even when struggles such as addiction pull us away from family, land, language, and our true selves.

This Storywork is significant as it acknowledges disconnection without shame and provides a path to reconnection through active listening. The roots represent our sources of strength, Ancestors, places, kinship, and responsibilities, while the branches encourage us to reach for the light and future choices. It also serves as a culturally grounded teaching tool, centering Indigenous women as knowledge holders and survivors, emphasizing their vital roles in preserving our narratives.

Cottonwood Woman - When Nature Spoke to the Nuche-Utes

I am the Mother Tree. As long as the rivers have flowed and the winds have sung their songs, I have stood here, my roots deep in the earth, drinking from the sacred waters below. My branches stretch upward, always seeking the light, and my leaves tremble with the stories that I carry for the land and all who walk upon it. I have witnessed the ebb and flow of life around me, as people come and go, sharing laughter, tears, and moments of prayer. I have embraced their secrets and carried their sorrows, feeling the weight of their stories unfold.

One day, she came to me, a woman burdened by her pain. I heard her before I saw her; her cries carried on the wind like a broken melody. She stumbled to my roots and fell to her knees, her body shaking as though her spirit was trying to leave her.

Her tears soaked the earth, and I felt the ache in her heart. She was like a branch torn from its tree, disconnected from the roots that once gave her strength. They remembered her, but she had forgotten how to listen and hear their voices.

"Why are you here, child?" I whispered through the rustling of my leaves.

She looked up, startled by my voice, her tear-streaked face lifting to meet my gaze. "I am lost," she said, her voice raw and broken. "The drink and the poison of drugs have taken everything: my family, my land, my language, my identity, my culture. I no longer know who I am. I came here because I did not know where else to go."

I swayed gently, my branches moving as if to cradle her in their shadow. "You came to the right place, child. I have seen your pain. I have heard your cries. You are not lost; you are only resting. You are not forgotten; you have simply forgotten yourself and how to listen."

Her head bowed low, tears cascading like heavy rain down her cheeks, each drop tracing a path through the dirt that clung to her skin, a veil shrouding the bruises of her soul. "I do not know how to find my way back," she whispered, vulnerability woven into her words. I do not know how to find myself, which has been scattered in the shadows."

"You are like me," I told her. "Do you see my roots? They stretch deep into the earth and reach the waters that give me life. Moreover, do you see my branches? They reach upward, always toward the Creator's light. You are the same; your roots connect you to your people, land, and Ancestors. Your branches hold the dreams of who you can still become. However, you must remember and listen."

"How can I?" she asked, her voice shaky. "What can I do to reconnect with my Ancestors and truly hear the essence of nature?"

I reached down with my whispers and let one of my leaves fall into her lap. She picked it up and stared at it, her finger tracing its shape.

"Do you see this leaf?" I asked gently. "Its shape resembles your heart, as it embodies your story. Every scar, every pain, every joy is etched here. Your heart encapsulates your bond with the land, family, and Ancestors. Take this leaf and let it accompany you on your

journey. Allow it to remind you that you are never truly alone. The land remembers you, even when you may forget and fail to listen. I will always honor your memory and speak your name."

She held the leaf close to her heart, and gradually, her tears began to slow. The gentle breeze rustled through my branches, and I sang her a song about the rivers, the mountains, and the stars. I sang for the women who had come before her, those who wept beneath my shade and discovered their true roots. She remained with me until the sun began to dip below the horizon, her body calm, and her spirit felt lighter. When she finally stood to leave, she placed her hand on my trunk and whispered, "Turgruyayk – Thank you."

I watched her walk away, her steps uncertain but steady. I understand that her journey will be challenging, but I believe she carries the strength of her Ancestors and the memories of creation's light in her heart. She will discover her path.

Years went by, and she walked under my branches, accompanied by her family and children. She stood proudly, her eyes shining and her spirit vibrant. As she placed her hand against my trunk, she softly expressed her gratitude in the language of her Ancestors. In that moment, the connection was palpable; I could feel her presence as she recognized that I was listening. The land embraced her return, allowing her to rediscover who she truly is and to listen with the innocence she had as a child.

For I am Mother Tree, and my purpose is to embrace those who seek solace beneath my branches. I gently remind them of their Ancestral roots, their inner strength, and the profound connection they have with the natural world. I serve as a bridge between the earth and the sky, weaving together experiences of sorrow and healing, and connecting what was lost to what can be rediscovered. Should you ever feel lost, I invite you to come to me, sit at my roots, and hold one of my leaves while you listen. The land remembers you, and I remember you. You

can hear my voice, my blessings, and the prayer songs I offer just for you. This is how we listen. In loving memory of Gina Simmons.

Narratives such as the "Cottonwood Women" remind us that stories are inherently collective and deeply rooted in our Ancestral heritage. They encapsulate the resilience and struggles faced by Indigenous peoples, illustrating how memory and spiritual ties to nature, as well as storytelling, are intricately woven into our healing processes (Cajete, 2000; Conrad & Hardison-Stevens, 2023; Hare, 2012; Kawagley, 1995; Montgomery, 2023; Simpson, 2014, 2017). These stories guide our spirit, connect us to the unseen, and shape our relationships with the land. Finding ways to establish land-based pathways for wellness serves as a direct, culturally relevant intervention for underlying issues that drive substance use. This connection to land and reconnecting with land is a vital mechanism for healing (Pihama & Tuhiwai Smith, 2023).

That disconnection from the land is a profound loss, one that continues to shape our collective healing. These ideas began to take form during the fall of 2023, when I completed an assignment in my doctoral course, Walking the Land in Silence. At that time, I did not realize this experience would become the seed and the first small roots of my dissertation. That walk taught me that silence is not emptiness but a form of dialogue with the land.

I retraced the path of my Ute Ancestors, who were forcibly removed from Colorado to the harsh terrain of the Uintah and Ouray Reservation in Utah. I began to sense the land's memory beneath my feet. The dry wind carried the sounds of old grief, and the standing Cottonwood trees offered shade and witness. Now the landscape, scarred by oil and gas production, felt wounded, yet the Cottonwood trees stood tall and resilient, the guardians of endurance and remembrance.

That experience helped me understand that forced removal involved more than just geography; it also encompassed identity, culture, and spirit. The echoes of these ruptures continue to resonate today in the struggles many of us face with addiction and disconnection. The land remembers what was taken and calls us to return, heal, and listen once more (Hardison-Stevens, 2016; Kimmerer, 2013; Simpson, 2007). This realization has shaped my understanding of recovery and relational healing through Indigenous frameworks.

These early reflections are further explored throughout my dissertation as I delve into the ways in which a connection to land, memory, and story can mend the fractures caused by colonization. Central to this exploration is the metaphor of "Killing the Wittigo," which I introduce in Chapter 2 as a framework for understanding addiction. In conjunction with this metaphor, I re-narrate my Ute story, "Hunger," illustrating how the pull of craving tightens around the body, constricts relationships, and shapes the mind toward a focus on taking rather than giving.

Building on this foundation, the teachings of Methot (2019) provide essential insights into how trauma influences the survival patterns that disrupt our sense of safety and belonging. These lessons ultimately guide us toward relational healing and accountability. In this context, "Hunger" and "Cottonwood Women" reflect a shared thematic journey, both narratives holding valuable lessons about the transition from isolation to reconnection and from silence to voice. They underscore the importance of land, memory, and relationships as core elements in the recovery process. While "Hunger" starkly portrays the consuming nature of craving and its vast repercussions, "Cottonwood Women" highlights the critical significance of listening, returning, and nurturing kinship through place and care.

These narratives are intricately woven together by the rich tradition of Indigenous storytelling, which provides a profound space for both movements. Storytelling transcends mere narrative; it serves as a medium for ethics, methodology, and pedagogy across various forms, including spoken narratives, prayers, art, and the land itself (Archibald, 2008). This dynamic interplay of stories becomes a vital tool for reimagining our relationships with one another and the world, ultimately paving the way for healing and reconnection.

Stories through Art

Another pivotal aspect of this dissertation is the integration of art, particularly through the lens of art pedagogy. Visual Art Narratives serve as a unique form of artistic expression that encapsulates emotions, memory, and healing in ways that words often fail to convey (Motta-Ochoa et al., 2024). I hold a Master of Fine Arts (MFA) and have dedicated my practice to creating works that convey profound truths, inviting viewers on a journey of exploration into identity, traditional knowledge, and the intricate intersections of race and belonging. This exploration becomes a collective experience that fosters dialogue and understanding within our communities. To this end, I employ a diverse array of artistic mediums—including oil painting, beading, photography, writing, and digital mixed media—each chosen for its distinct rhythm of expression and storytelling potential. Through these varied forms, I aim to create intricate narratives that resonate on multiple levels and speak to the human condition.

This study utilizes artwork as a powerful vehicle for storytelling and healing, encouraging collective reflection among viewers. It invites them to confront the enduring impacts of colonial narratives, addiction, and the stigma surrounding these issues. In doing so, we reclaim and redefine our narratives, highlighting the beauty and resilience found within art. By positioning art as a pedagogy of storytelling, I hope to illuminate pathways to understanding

and connection that are often overlooked, ultimately fostering a more profound sense of belonging and community.

In the realm of visual storytelling, art emerges as a powerful medium for conveying complex narratives and profound emotional experiences. In my artistic exploration, I illustrate the intricate relationship between my brother and the Coyote character, as depicted in Figure 1. This character serves as a multifaceted symbol within the narrative, embodying both the transformative potential of healing and the constraints imposed by addiction.

Coyote's duality encapsulates the journey through a tumultuous landscape of pain and renewal. On one hand, Coyote signifies hope and offers guidance, illuminating pathways toward recovery and personal transformation. Conversely, Coyote also functions as a Trickster, representing the entrapments of addiction and the cycle of dependency that ensnares those affected (Brown, 2021; Johnson-Jennings et al., 2020). This dynamic interplay underscores the intricate web of suffering intertwined with the potential for rebirth. This theme resonates strongly within the experiences of individuals grappling with substance use and alcohol dependency.

Visual art narrative also serves as a significant example of Indigenous Storywork, utilizing artistic expression to communicate vital cultural narratives and ancestral knowledge. In Indigenous contexts, storytelling through art serves as a vital conduit for preserving traditions, fostering understanding, and promoting healing within communities. By weaving personal and collective experiences into my artwork, I aim to highlight the resilience inherent in the struggle against addiction while also honoring the cultural frameworks that inform these experiences. Through this lens, art becomes a vehicle for both individual reflection and communal storytelling, bridging the past and present in the pursuit of healing and understanding.

Figure 1

Coyote and My Brother - As One

Note. Photo by Valentina Sireech (2025)

Recently, my art has taken an introspective turn, focusing on family and personal relationships. I began documenting my brother and his struggles with addiction, creating pieces that address stigma through visual expression. This process became a way to reclaim recovery, transforming pain into meaningful dialogue. My brother agreed to pose for me, and soon my sister and cousin joined as well. Through this journey, I began to ask myself: What purpose does art serve if it does not help others see differently through an Indigenous lens? What is the value of art if it does not create space for empathy or encourage people to reexamine addiction and those living with it?

I want viewers to enter this space and confront these realities from an Indigenous perspective, where art does not imitate life but restores relationships. Drawing on Tuck's (2009) essay, "Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities," my work aligns with her "desire-based" narrative, which opposes defining individuals solely by the harm they have experienced. Instead, it focuses on resilience, imagination, and the capacity for healing.

Through spiritual and narrative approaches, I retell these stories as continuations of strength, love, and cultural survival. Ultimately, my work seeks to foster a deeper understanding and empathy towards those affected by addiction, highlighting the power of art to convey complex human experiences and promote healing within communities. This approach enables a richer dialogue about the realities faced by individuals and families, bridging gaps in understanding through the lens of culture and personal experience.

Purpose of this Study

The Roots Beneath My Brother's Suffering

In the fall of 2024, the phone rang on a gray Saturday afternoon. My brother's voice came through thin and strained, threaded with pain. He told me he needed to reach the emergency room. I recognized that sound immediately. It carried years of substance use, cycles of effort and relapse, and the heavy shame that often follows Indigenous experiences of addiction shaped by silence and stigma. His words arrived in fragments, shaped by withdrawal and exhaustion. I listened, already gathering my keys, already knowing where this road would lead.

When I arrived at his house, the air felt unnaturally still, as if the walls themselves were holding their breath. He climbed into the passenger seat without saying a word. His body trembled in sharp waves. His jaw remained tight, and his hands clenched. I drove faster than I should have, offering steady words meant to ground us both. Every mile carried urgency, fear,

and an unspoken history rooted in long patterns of survival and harm within our family and community.

At the hospital, he sank into a waiting room chair while the front desk worker moved through questions she was not prepared to ask. The sterile space reflected a broader reality. This rural facility, like many others, lacked readiness for the cultural and clinical realities of addiction within Indigenous lives, where medical systems often fail to address historical trauma, relational harm, and cultural context (Duran & Firehammer, 2017; Johnson-Jennings et al., 2023). Nurses moved quickly once we were brought back, searching for a vein shaped by years of struggle and use. When they finally succeeded, the IV fluids began to drip. The room seemed to soften. My brother drifted into an uneasy sleep. I remained beside him, counting his slow and uneven breaths.

Later, a nurse spoke quietly as she adjusted his chart. She shared how often cases like his arrived through their doors. "Every week now, and we are not equipped for medical detox." Her words stayed with me, heavy and unresolved. Gratitude felt thin in the face of such honesty. Sitting in that squeaky plastic chair, my thoughts returned to the boy he once was. I saw him at ten years old, riding his BMX bike, laughing with an uneven mullet haircut and a mouth full of dirt, words, and bad jokes (Indian teasing). That boy still lived inside the man now resting before me, struggling to find his way back.

As he settled deeper into sleep, his breathing came in shallow waves, each one carrying pain the medication failed to fully quiet. His body hovered between surrender and resistance. I watched closely, trying to understand how the river of his life had carried him to this bed, a place that held both suffering and a fragile longing for renewal.

Stories like this live in every Indigenous community I know. They surface in whispered grief and open anger. They hold truths beyond the reach of statistics. They carry intergenerational loss, policy failure, and the suffocating weight of stigma (Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998). Within these stories, endurance remains. Tenderness lives in remembrance. Strength rises through telling. Life insists on itself, even when systems attempt to silence it.

The purpose of this study is to understand addiction and healing within Indigenous contexts through the lived experiences, memories, and stories of Indigenous people. This study centers Indigenous epistemologies as the foundation for meaning-making and knowledge generation. It approaches addiction as a relational, historical, cultural, and spiritual context shaped by colonial disruption, intergenerational traumas, and systemic inequity (Brave Heart, 2003; Gone et al., 2019). Rather than locating substance use within individual pathology, this research situates it within collective stories and ongoing structures that shape Indigenous life.

This study seeks to reframe the dominant narrative of addiction that relies on a Eurocentric, deficit-based framework. Conventional treatment models often define substance use as moral failure, behavioral defect, or biological disease, while disconnecting distress from land, culture, and collective memory (Chavarria, 2017; Johnson-Jennings et al., 2018; Kirmayer et al., 2011). Such approaches obscure the historical forces that shaped Indigenous suffering and silence Indigenous ways of knowing. This dissertation responds by centering story, theory, and memory as method, affirming Indigenous narratives as a source of knowledge, resistance, and instruction through Indigenous Storywork and Art Pedagogy Narratives (Absolon, 2022; Archibald, 2008; Campbell, 2022; Christian, 2017; Lindala, 2023; Smith, 2012).

A central goal of this research is to document how addiction and recovery develop over the course of life. Participants share stories about early encounters with alcohol or drugs,

experiences during use, and moments of change, interruption, or return (Besaw, 2022; Brown, 2021; Kovach, 2019). These stories address childhood, education, family relationships, and historical context, illustrating how substance use emerges within broader social and cultural realities shaped by kinship disruption (Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998; Evans-Campbell, 2008). Memory acts as a bridge between personal experience and collective history, enabling participants to reconnect with themselves through remembrance (Friedland & Napoleon, 2015; Hampton, 1995). Listening to these narratives in their full complexity reveals how colonial history and contemporary systems influence pathways into and through addiction.

Equally relevant to this study is an exploration of healing as a land-based and ceremonial process. Indigenous epistemologies view land as a living archive of its members, spirits, and teachings (Cajete, 2000; Deloria, 1999; Kimmerer, 2013; Silko, 2006). Connection to place supports recovery by restoring relationships to self, ancestors, and community. Land-based memory reconnects individuals to lived histories, cultural responsibilities, and ways of knowing, being, and doing grounded in ceremony and relational practice (Cajete, 2000; Hare, 2012). Through place-based knowledge, healing emerges as an embodied process rooted in presence, belonging, and spiritual continuity rather than as a linear clinical outcome.

This study stems from my personal connection to land, memory, and story. I approached this work from both a researcher’s and a community member's perspective, shaped by my place, family histories, and lived experiences. I intentionally incorporate place-based knowledge and Indigenous healing frameworks because the land has always taught me that memory and reverence help us return to balance (Bastien, 2004; Cajete, 2000; Kimmerer, 2013; McKenzie et al., 2016; Tuck & McKenzie et al., 2016). Within Indigenous Storywork, knowledge emerges through ceremony, lived history, and relationship, rather than through detached intervention

(Baldy, 2018; Campbell, 2022; Chavarria, 2017). Healing unfolds through connection to land, to Ancestors, and to one another.

The purpose of using visual arts is essential to this process, as it engages forms of knowledge that enable us to utilize art for grief, survival, storytelling, and transformation, often confirmed through written language (Belcourt, 2014, 2017; Janvier, 2010).

Research Questions

The overarching research question for this study is: How does the integration of Indigenous Storywork with visual art and narrative storytelling open pathways for healing, cultural reclamation, and self-determination among Indigenous individuals navigating recovery from addiction, including those actively engaged in treatment?

Supporting research questions include the following:

1. In what ways do stories grounded in land, community, and lived experience reveal addictions as a collective and historical response rather than an isolated personal condition?
2. How do visual storytelling practices such as digital collage, beadwork, and photography express dimensions of healing that extend beyond the limits of spoken or written language?
3. How do Indigenous methodologies grounded in relational accountability and cultural continuity enrich clinical and educational practices aimed at community wellness?
4. How does the relationship with land, understood as a living relative, teacher, and site of memory, create openings for healing from substance and alcohol use that Western treatment models often overlook?

5. What stories do Indigenous individuals and families share about addiction, recovery, survival, and healing, and how do these narratives reflect teachings of cultural resilience, ancestral knowledge, and the restoration of kinship?

Together, these questions establish the foundation and direction of this dissertation. They invite a return to story as a living source of knowledge and healing, where Indigenous voices, family memories, and creative expressions shape an understanding of recovery grounded in relationships, land, and continuity, transcending Western frameworks.

Roots Remember - Interviews and Participants

In this opening chapter, I explore how interviews and participatory methods establish the ethical and relational foundations of my study. This research is rooted (see Figure 2) in Indigenous storytelling, where narratives embody living knowledge through connection, memory, and responsibility (Archibald, 2008). Because of this foundation, interviews transcend mere procedural tasks; they transform into spaces where genuine lived experiences emerge, supported by trust, care, and mutual accountability.

The participants in this study include Indigenous men and women who are either in recovery or navigating their lives with addictions. Their involvement emphasizes the importance of community voice and authentic lived experiences. Each interview serves as an opportunity for participants to share their stories of pain, resilience, love, and longing, articulated in their own words. Some have graciously allowed me to use their full names, while others prefer to remain anonymous. Through conversational interviews built on respect and relational accountability, participants direct the dialogue toward what resonates, what feels delicate, and what yearns to be expressed after long periods of silence.

My data collection primarily involved interviews, which I have approached with a heightened sense of ethical responsibility grounded in Indigenous Storywork. This methodology serves as a means of teaching, surviving, and a framework for healing. In this research, I explore the diverse ways in which international Indigenous communities utilize interviews to convey Cultural narratives. Māori scholars, writing within the kaupapa Māori tradition, describe interviews as relational practices deeply connected to whakapapa (genealogy) and collective responsibility. These scholars argue that storytelling has the potential to strengthen communities rather than merely serve institutional extraction (Pere, 1994; Pihama, 2010; Smith, 2012).

In the context of this study, these interviews create a space for narratives that are often kept silent within families, burdened by shame and guilt. I have observed that all participants articulated similar themes, including childhood trauma, disrupted kinship, emotional abandonment, and the intergenerational harm experienced by their communities. I believe that these stories emerge when participants feel secure in a trusting environment; with courage, they offer pathways toward recognition and healing.

Figure 2

Where the Roots Remember

Note. Photo by Valentia Sireech (2025)

As narratives accumulate, an analysis emerges that highlights the significance of relational listening and attentiveness to the resonance found within these stories. Kovach (2009) and Willson (2008) articulate this analysis as an ethical practice that is fundamentally shaped by our responsibilities to participants, ancestors, and the broader community. Within these

narratives, many individuals speak to the silence surrounding separations from family and express a profound desire to reconnect.

These shared experiences illustrate how addiction frequently takes root in conditions of disconnection, which are often informed by historical ruptures and familial loss. Furthermore, silence itself holds substantial meaning; it teaches us how pain evolves when words remain unspoken (Jackson, 1988; Pihama, 2010). Through this lens, it becomes evident that addressing these silences is essential to understanding the complexities of relationships and the lasting impacts of trauma.

In Chapter 3 - Methodology, I examine how interviews and analysis serve as interconnected practices of responsibility. Data collection and analysis are inherently linked within Indigenous Storywork. Participants share their pain, memories, and experiences of survival through this process. I approached these narratives with care, honoring storytelling as both a method and a theoretical framework, as well as a means to facilitate healing and re-establish kinship.

Why Stories Matter?

This study emerges from lived experience. I have observed how conventional treatment models often overlook the cultural, historical, and spiritual dimensions that underlie addiction. These frameworks tend to isolate the individual from their community and spiritual environment, reinforcing a fragmented understanding of recovery. By integrating storytelling with art-based research methods, this study reframes narrative as a means of theorizing, a way to produce and share knowledge through lived experiences, cultural practices, and relational engagement, rather than detached observation.

This dissertation stands at the intersection of personal story and scholarly responsibility. My life, my family experience with addiction, my father's story, and my relationship with land shape how I listen, interpret, and write. As Wilson teaches, relational accountability forms the foundation of Indigenous research, requiring reciprocity, care, and respect in all stages of inquiry (Wilson, 2008).

This dissertation embarks on a transformative journey, redefining the concept of addiction through Indigenous Storywork and epistemologies. Here, storytelling is deeply intertwined with the connections to land, kinship, and healing. Memory acts as our guide, leading us to a profound understanding that arises not from diagnosis but from the practice of remembrance itself.

As I engage with the stories woven through Indigenous Storywork and Visual Art, I find myself asking a vital question: What if healing comes from truly listening to our stories? By restoring Indigenous narrative sovereignty and grounding our paths to healing in the sacred bonds of kinship and reciprocity, this work aims to transcend the narrow confines of deficit narratives. Instead, it strives to highlight a framework of collective renewal, justice, and balance, an invitation to reimagine our world through the power of shared stories and interconnected lives.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical frameworks guiding this dissertation are central to my work. They arise from my experiences in listening, witnessing, and carrying stories across generations. These frameworks do more than organize my ideas about research; they shape how knowledge enters my body, how memory communicates, and how art becomes a visceral lived experience. Theory, method, and expression move together as one cohesive practice.

The heart of this work rests within interconnected Indigenous frameworks that hold relationship, land, memory, and creativity as sources of knowledge. These frameworks include the following:

- Relational Accountability (Absolon, 2022; Kovach, 2019; Smith, 2021; Wilson, 2008)
- Indigenous Storywork (Archibald, 2008)
- Land-Based Knowledge (Kimmerer, 2013; Redvers, 2020; Simpson, 2014)
- Indigenous Worldviews (shaped through memory, dreams, and spirituality)
- Indigenous Epistemology (Battiste, 2002; Cajete, 2000; Kovach, 2019; Smith, 2021)
- Indigenous Axiology (Chilisa, 2012; Kovach, 2019; Web-Pillwax, 2001; Wilson, 2008)
- Intergenerational Memory (Brave Heart, 1998; Cajete, 1994; Deloria, 1999)
- Embodies Knowledge (Aluli-Meyer, 2014; Simpson, 2014)
- Ceremony as Theory (Archibald, 2008; Absolon, 2022; Kovach, 2009)
- Relational Time (Deloria, 1994; TallBear, 2013)
- Survivance (Kimmerer, 2011; Vizenor, 2008).

Collectively, they guide me to understand addiction, healing, and storytelling as a collective process grounded in responsibility and continuity.

Relational Accountability stands as the ethical and spiritual core of this exploration, emphasizing the interconnectedness of knowledge with responsibilities toward individuals, the land, our Ancestors, and future generations (Absolon, 2022; Kovach, 2019; Smith, 2019; Wilson, 2008). Within this framework, I maintain accountability not only for the narratives that are

shared but also for how these stories are treated and the trajectories they follow throughout my research.

In contrast to traditional paradigms that often adopt an extractive approach, this research embraces relationships as a foundational element. As articulated by Smith (2021), Indigenous research represents "a process which involves the revitalization and restoration of Indigenous" knowledge (p. 233). When examining the sensitive context of substance use, this responsibility underscores that the researcher serves as a relative whose efforts must actively promote the survival and well-being of the community. This perspective resonates deeply with Indigenous scholarship, which frames knowledge as relational and ceremonial. The emphasis here is on responsibility and care, rather than ownership or control, as emphasized by Wilson (2008). Through this lens, knowledge becomes a shared journey that seeks to honor and uplift communities, reflecting a commitment to the interconnectedness of all beings and the wisdom that emerges from those relationships. The narrative of research, therefore, focuses on fostering a dialogue that respects and upholds the dignity of all involved.

Indigenous Storywork embodies a multifaceted approach, functioning as both a theoretical foundation and a methodological strategy (Archibald, 2008). The narratives integral to this framework encapsulate profound teachings, shaped by collective experiences of trauma, love, survival, and resilience. In my own journey, Indigenous Storywork forms the core of my understanding regarding healing and recovery from addiction. I arrived at this framework through my lived experiences, the family narratives passed through generations, and the stories shared with me within community circles and interview spaces, which were cultivated in a spirit of trust and care.

I perceive a story as a source of vibrant knowledge, one that is already alive and shaped by context. I employ this theoretical framework because it mirrors the historical practices of healing within Indigenous communities, where stories serve as vessels of memory and guidance. They allow individuals to express their entire life narratives, rather than focusing solely on moments of suffering. I wholeheartedly believe that through the sharing of personal stories, individuals can rediscover connections to kinship, place, and their Indigenous identity. Healing emerges as individuals are heard and witnessed, affirming the significance of their journeys.

My personal story remains ever-present within this framework, demonstrating its relevance. This perspective aligns with the scholarship of Indigenous Storywork, which positions theory as a form of pedagogy, an ethical practice, and a foundational tool for comprehension (Archibald, 2008). As Kovach (2009) eloquently states, “stories remind us of who we are and of our belongings” (p. 94). Methodologically, this emphasizes the necessity of engaging narratives to grasp the more profound truths embedded in our lived experiences.

Land-Based Knowledge situates experience within place. Like the story of my childhood, cutting and gathering firewood at this location. Land holds memory of movement, rupture, and return. Lived experience remains deeply rooted in land through seasonal rhythms, ancestral presence, and a sense of belonging. Addiction and healing emerge through layered relationships to a place shaped by displacement and survival. Healing unfolds through renewed connection to land as teacher and witness. This understanding aligns with Indigenous land-centered scholarship that recognizes land as an active source of knowledge and healing (Absolon, 2022; Kimmerer, 2013; Simpson, 2014). Simpson (2017) states, “The alternative to extractivism is deep reciprocity. Extraction and assimilation go together; the act of extraction removes all of the relationships that give whatever is being extracted meaning” (p. 75). This suggests that addiction

is often symptomatic of the "extraction" of a person from their land and culture. Therefore, healing requires a resurgence of land-based relationships.

Utilizing Indigenous worldviews as a theoretical framework reveals the brilliance inherent in honoring these diverse epistemologies. Central to this approach are the elements of memory, dreams, and spirituality—dimensions demanding recognition rather than relegation to the margins of understanding (Hampton, 1995). This framework facilitates an exploration of lived experiences, the influence of spiritual mentorship, and the enduring presence of Ancestors, all of which converge to shape narratives surrounding addiction and recovery, thereby underscoring their essential roles (Cajete, 2000; Friedland & Napoleon, 2015; Kawagley, 1995).

Memory is a vessel that carries ancestral experiences, manifested through our narratives, silences, and embodied responses. It has been shared with me that dreams provide guidance and foster connections across temporal boundaries. Through this understanding, I have come to recognize how healing, recovery, and knowledge emerge from lived experiences. Memory has profoundly influenced my work and is often interwoven with family stories and the physical body itself. My own memories shape my listening and understanding of meaning. I often reflect on my younger sister, who has passed on, noting how I perceive her presence now within my dreams and memories. In those moments, she feels close and present, offering comfort and direction.

The interplay of spiritual presence interlaces the intricate threads of grief, hope, and responsibility that permeate our daily existence. Through this lens, I perceive recovery as a profound journey infused with spiritual guidance, essential for individuals traversing the tumultuous path of addiction toward healing.

Healing arises from a holistic perspective, wherein mind, body, spirit, and memory unite in harmonious synergy, guided by teachings that affirm the intrinsic value of spiritual and emotional knowledge. This understanding is crucial for engaging fully with life and discovering pathways toward wellness. Deloria (2003) presents a compelling critique of the Western paradigm that dismisses oral traditions as mere anecdotes; instead, he posits that these traditions serve as vital records of geological and spiritual histories, preserved through the tapestry of memory and sustained in their importance over time (Deloria, 2003).

By integrating these strands of thought, we cultivate a richer understanding of the journey toward recovery, imbued with the transformative power of spirituality and informed by the wisdom of those who came before us. Thus, the narrative of healing unfolds, illuminating the way forward through resilience, ancestral knowledge, and profound interconnectedness.

Indigenous Epistemology and Axiology serve as the foundation for understanding the intricate pathways through which knowledge weaves itself into this study. Here, addiction transcends mere diagnostic labels, emerging instead through lived experience. According to Kovach (2009), “knowledge is relational and is derived from connections with living beings and the environment” (Kovach, 2009, p. 61). This profound insight becomes my guiding principle, prompting me to embrace the narratives of addiction and recovery as interconnected lessons rather than disjointed anecdotes.

Indigenous epistemology elevates storytelling and artistic expression as vital and authoritative forms of understanding. Each narrative encapsulates memory and imparts wisdom, while art breathes life through its body, color, texture, imagery, and movement (Little Bear, 2000). These multifaceted expressions afford the experiences of addiction a dignified platform from which to emerge, resonating with depth and authenticity. Cajete (2000) illuminates this

perspective, asserting that Indigenous knowledge encompasses “the whole person, the community, and the natural world” (p. 15).

Conversely, Indigenous axiology profoundly influences how I navigate the responsibilities inherent in addiction research. The values that guide my approach shape the collection, stewardship, and return of these stories. Principles such as respect, reciprocity, responsibility, and care form the very roots of my practice. Wilson (2008) aptly notes that “an Indigenous axiology is built upon the principles of relational accountability” (p. 77). This value system ensures that the stories of addiction and recovery are honored and safeguarded within the context of a relationship, rather than being reduced to data points for analytical dissection.

In this delicate interplay of knowledge and values, the realm of addiction transforms into a sacred space where the voices of those affected may echo with strength and resilience. Here, we are reminded that every narrative carries within it the potential for healing, understanding, and a deeper connection to our shared humanity. Thus, we embark on this journey as researchers and as stewards of stories, committed to preserving the integrity and richness of the lived experiences we encounter.

Embodied knowledge, ceremony as theory, relational time, and survivance comprise the closing movement of this theoretical framework, as represented in this study through the image of the rings in the Cottonwood tree. Each ring holds memory, pressure, pause, and renewal. Experience enters the work through our bodies, where sensations, emotions, and creative practices carry what memories hold. Art becomes a site where this knowledge takes shape in the form of texture, color, and shape, allowing healing to surface through bodily awareness and creative expression (Cross & DeLorme, 2018; Kawagley, 1995; Mātāmua, 2017; Million, 2013).

Ceremony provides a sense of rhythm and orientation, shaping how meaning unfolds through gathering, intention, and shared presence. Time moves in cycles of return, rest, and renewal, all held within relationships and progression. Survivance flows through these rites as endurance and creative presence, affirming life, continuity, and relational strength within stories of addiction and recovery (Baldy, 2018; Cajete, 2000; Deloria, 2008; Kovach, 2009; Silko, 2006; Smith, 2012; Vizenor, 2008).

Just as the Cottonwood tree symbolizes growth through interconnectedness, these frameworks embody the intricate layers of lived experience that are shaped by seasons of both adversity and healing. Consequently, this study serves as a guiding light, illustrating how storytelling and artistic expression transmit knowledge across generations. It emphasizes that recovery is merely a destination but a dynamic journey, deeply rooted in memory, relationships, and a profound sense of enduring presence.

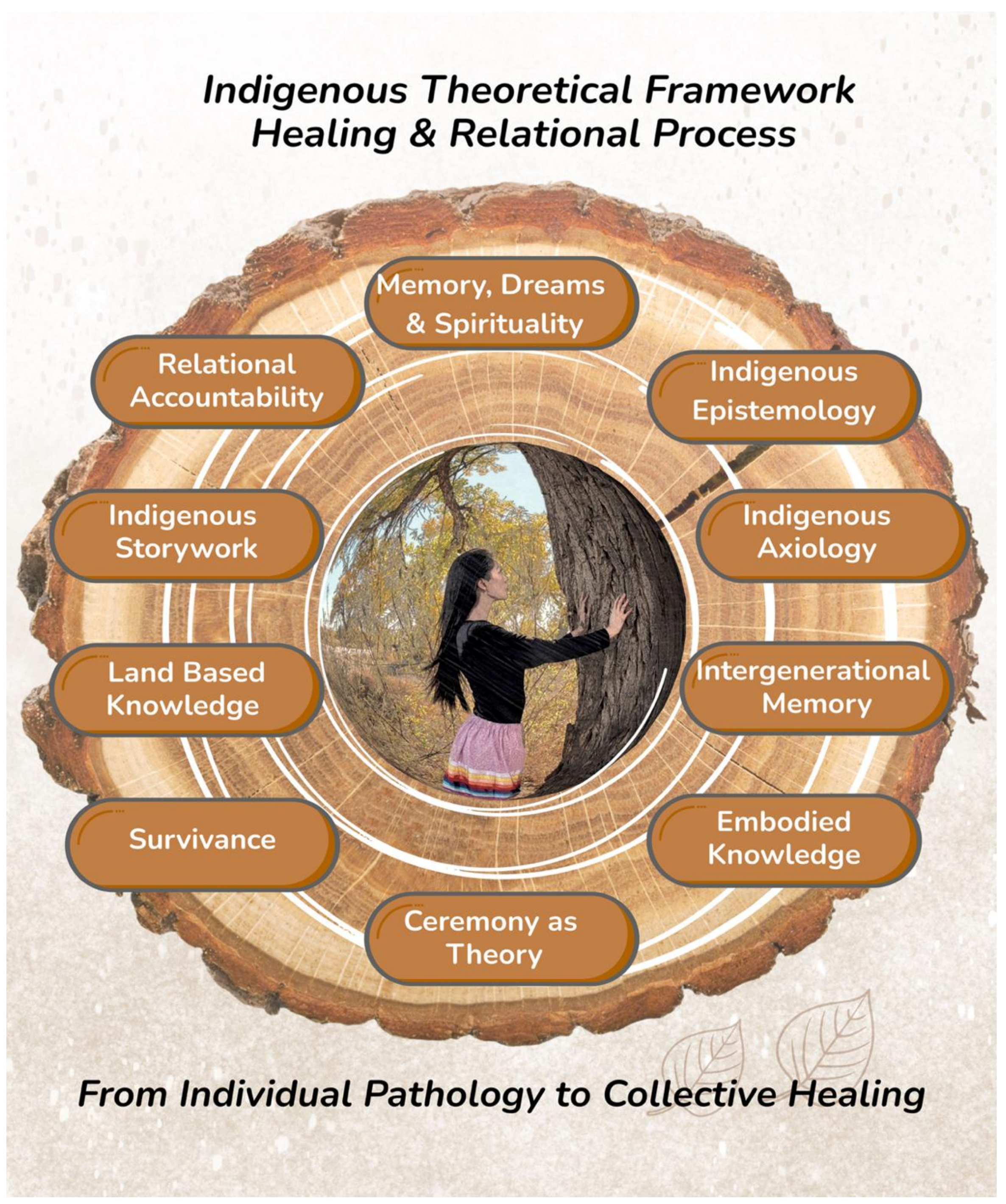
In Figure 3, the theoretical framework for this study is situated within the context of Cottonwood rings, with each ring representing a distinct season of growth, drought, hardship, wind, and renewal. These rings do exist in isolation; collectively, they convey memory across time. The graph reflects this mode of understanding. Healing occupies the center, serving as a dynamic process shaped by layers of relationships, experiences, and responsibilities (Absolon, 2022; Wilson, 2008). Like Cottonwood rings, the theories extend both outward and inward, preserving traces of past events while simultaneously creating space for ongoing developments.

In this study, Cottonwood rings serve as a metaphor for the intricate dynamics of addiction and healing as they unfold across generations. Each ring symbolizes moments of rupture, endurance, and care, encapsulating the essence of intergenerational memory that resides within its layered structure (Simpson, 1999). The interweaving of story, ceremony, land, and

embodied knowledge constructs a framework that reflects our family histories, the impacts of colonialism, and the journey of survival.

Figure 3

Healing & Relational Process



Crucially, relational accountability binds these rings together, emphasizing that knowledge is cultivated through relationships, a theme resonant in the narratives presented in this study (Kovach, 2021; Smith, 2021). As Indigenous Storywork flows through these rings like breath, it carries profound teachings rooted in memory, dreams, and the spirit world. This land-based knowledge underscores that healing is anchored in place, reminding us that growth is intimately connected to water, soil, and familial ties.

The Cottonwood serves as a profound symbol of relational time, illustrating that the healing process is circular rather than linear. This cyclical nature encompasses moments of expansion, pause, and continuation. It embodies knowledge that transcends verbal communication, as our bodies retain memories that words often fail to articulate. Within the growth rings of the Cottonwood resides on the concept of survivance, characterized by persistence, presence, and continuity. Each ring signifies that Indigenous life persists despite fractures and the silences imposed by collective forgetting.

Figure 3 serves as an analytical representation of my research, encapsulating the notion of healing as a circular experience intertwined with the natural world. It synthesizes theory, memory, and methodology into a cohesive framework, illustrating that we are intrinsically connected to living nature (Kovach, 2021; Walters & Anderson, 2013). This connection informs our understanding of healing as a form of growth shaped through the interplay of time, relationships, and responsibilities. Just as the Cottonwood stands as a testament to the resilience of life, the graph underscores our shared existence within this living ecosystem, reminding us that we are a vital part of the continuous cycle of life.

The Cottonwood serves as a powerful metaphor because its growth rings bear witness to the passage of time, the experiences of rupture, and the resilience required to endure. As the Cottonwood holds evidence of these elements, the narratives presented in the opening pages encompass intricate pieces of evidence, familial memories, community grief, and the relentless effort to survive.

Together, we have traversed experiences marked by firewood days, hospital rooms, funerals, dreams, and the silences framing our inherited legacies. My intention in sharing these beginnings is to reframe addiction as relational and historical, rather than casting it as an isolated defect. I write to validate the role of narrative as a means of knowledge and responsibility, rooted in our bodies, our lands, and our kinships (Archibald, 2008; Wilson, 2008).

In this chapter, I articulate the problems at hand and the stakes involved through a combination of narrative, data, and relational truth. I conceptualize addiction as an inherited condition of disconnection that manifests within bodies, families, and homelands, shaped significantly by colonial disruptions and transmitted through intergenerational memory. Historically, settler systems have reduced Indigenous suffering to narratives of deficit while proposing treatment models disconnected from land, language, and kinship. I reject that disconnection. Instead, I position this line of research within the landscape of Indigenous epistemology, recognizing that knowledge is imparted by the land, memory has its voice, and healing occurs alongside relationships (Absolon, 2022; Kimmerer, 2013). As my dissertation progresses, you will discern how this foundational understanding shapes my research questions as well as my view of recovery as a journey back to balance, facilitated through storywork and visual narrative practices. It is essential for me to emphasize that all narratives must be treated as

living entities that require care, consent, reciprocity, and accountability; the story does not belong exclusively to me (Archibald, 2008; Kovach, 2019).

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Before I begin writing, I lay down tobacco as a respectful offering to the spirit family accompanying me. I honor those whose names I pray, and the stories entwined in my blood and breath. I seek clear thinking, humility, and care. This chapter opens in this spirit, emphasizing that thought is inextricably linked to the essence of spirit and that actual knowledge arises from deep connections.

The storywork (Archibald, 2008) titled "Preparing to Gather Firewood," which introduces this chapter, highlights the significance of lived experiences marked by both warmth and challenges, such as addiction and the disruption of kinship bonds. The Storywork illustrates how Indigenous experiences are deeply interwoven with themes of resilience, accountability, and significant connections to both land and culture. This perspective embodies the essence of Indigenous Storywork, which places significant value on storytelling as a means to express intricate emotions and convey Indigenous knowing. The text highlights the essential role of narratives grounded in lived experience in shaping addiction research. It emphasizes the need for an Indigenous perspective that addresses family dynamics, trauma, and healing within Indigenous communities. By employing such methodologies, we can promote holistic, respectful dialogues that enhance understanding and management of addiction.

Preparing to Gather Firewood

Winter always held a certain rhythm, a seasonal task intertwined with my childhood home. It was something we did each year, a pattern as familiar as the land itself. On this particular day, the sky spread out like a thick, low-hanging blanket of gray clouds, an overcast that made the world feel both heavy and quiet. A light mist of snowflakes drifted through the air, and despite the season, there was an unusual warmth to it, not cold, not biting, just a comforting

presence. I was always told that this kind of sky meant snow was coming soon, signaling that it was time to start preparing the firewood.

I loved days like this. The ground was already dusted in a thin layer of snow, and if you looked closely, really closely, at the way the flakes landed, you would see endless patterns with tiny, intricate designs, each one different, and each one holding a story. I used to think they looked like fragments of another world; pieces of some faraway galaxy scattered at my feet. Even now, I catch myself staring, letting my imagination wander through the shapes, carried back to those moments when the land, the sky, and the quiet knowing of the seasons taught me how to see.

In the late 1970s, we relied on firewood to keep warm during the long winters. I remember one particular morning when I woke up to the smell of coffee and the soft sounds of 70s country music playing on the local AM station, KNEU Basin Country. Charlie Rich's song "Hey, Have You Seen the Most Beautiful Girl in the World," was playing gently in the background, and I could hear my father singing along. Even now, I can still hear his voice—sometimes in the kitchen and sometimes behind the wheel of his old pickup, with a cigarette resting between his fingers.

The morning was a mix of sounds and smells: Charlie Rich's voice, the faint crackle of the radio, the rich aroma of coffee mingled with cigarette smoke. My father smoked one to two packs of cigarettes a day. However, beneath that heavy haze lingered the faint, grounding scent of cedar from my mother's early morning prayers. This daily ritual filled our home with a sense of spiritual protection, even amidst the chaos.

Firewood cutting day meant all hands were on deck. My mother woke us early, making sure we were out of bed and ready to prepare the equipment: extra chainsaws, gas cans, axes,

and hatchets for the smaller branches. We layered up against the cold, but gloves were always hard to find, so we pulled mismatched socks from the laundry room to cover our hands. It was amusing when it was just the two of us, but I recall feeling embarrassed when other people were present. My job that morning was to help pack our lunch: water, a thermos of coffee, leftover tortillas with bacon, and a couple of eggs made into sandwiches. I felt good, laughing with my sister as I finished packing. However, even as I tried to hold on to that warmth of family, of laughter, of feeling capable, there was a part of me bracing for what might come next.

The night before still echoed in my mind: my father's drunken yelling, my mother's muffled sobs, my little sister crying, my older sister begging him to stop, and my baby brother wailing in the middle of it all. I had learned from a young age to stay ready. If things escalated, I was the runner, the one who had to bolt through the snow to my grandmother's house and tell her to call the Tribal Police. I knew where my shoes were by the door, and if I had to, I would jump out the window. My little sister would whisper, "Are you ready?" Moreover, I would always answer, "Yes, I am ready." That was my real job: staying prepared for anything that might come up. Yes, I am ready, sister.

By openly affirming my readiness, just as I did during that tumultuous night of uncertainty and resilience, I wholeheartedly commit to the ongoing journey of reclaiming our stories and narratives. This vital work involves intricately blending our collective memories, traumas, stories, and Indigenous healing practices, all of which have shaped our identities and cultural heritage. Additionally, we draw profound insights from Indigenous storytelling. Together, these elements will honor our past and illuminate a path forward, where our diverse voices and unique stories serve as guiding lights in the journey toward collective healing and empowerment.

Under the Cottonwood's Shade: Weaving Indigenous Narratives of Healing and Resilience in Addiction Research

This literature review focused on Indigenous scholars who have written about and advocated for transformative shifts in understanding identity. It explores the academic and spiritual discussions surrounding the use of Storywork and dreams as methodologies for reconnecting with family and childhood memories. For Indigenous scholars, these practices are more than just creative efforts; they are vital for achieving spiritual reconciliation and reclaiming identity.

Storywork (Archibald, 2008), rooted in oral tradition and the creative arts, can serve as a healing practice, helping you reclaim a sense of identity and sustain your recovery from addiction. When we tell our story in our language of memory, image, and breath, we resist hegemonic narratives and return authorship to Indigenous people and families (Gone, 2011, 2012). This review focuses on holistic healing through an infusion of Indigenous teachings about life force and relational accountability with land and more-than-human kin. It also sees dreams and memories as ways in which you are guided, given spiritual awakening, and awakened toward wholeness (Napolean & Friedland, 2013; Rowan et al., 2014). In research and education, Indigenous Storywork facilitates decolonizing practice through a lens that prioritizes inquiry with respect, responsibility, and reciprocity (Archibald, 2008; Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008). In this literature review, I challenge colonial separations between mind and body, past and present, and knowledge and spirit, and center Indigenous voice, methods, and ethical relations as the foundation of scholarship (Maracle, 2015; Wahinke Topa & Narvaez, 2022).

This literature review gathers scholarship on Indigenous Storywork, land-based knowledge, narrative visual art, and decolonizing methods in addiction-related research. It

emphasizes how these approaches address intergenerational trauma and promote recovery, both of which are central to my dissertation research. Authors emphasize the value of Indigenous epistemologies as a system of knowledge that is deeply rooted in land, kinship, and spirit. Within this larger paradigm, wellness involves the interrelated emotional, physical, intellectual, and spiritual dimensions (Archibald, 2008; Linklater, 2014; Wilson, 2008). This perspective, when applied to addiction research, shifts the focus from stories of personal shortcomings to issues of loss, broken family ties, and forced cultural disconnection (Atalay, 2019; Ball & Moselle, 2013). Importantly, it emphasizes empowerment, individual accountability, and healing methods rooted in the community.

A theme across all the literature examined is that recovery is a process strengthened by a community's teachings and by participating in teachings ingrained in the environment, Storywork, languages, ceremonies, and family. Such teachings are central to reviving a sense of belonging and moral accountability, in opposition to the displacement caused by colonial structures. This review underscores the power of Indigenous Storywork, guided by principles such as respect, responsibility, and interrelatedness (Archibald, 2008), to reclaim personal narratives and foster agency, particularly within addiction recovery contexts where substance use can be understood as a narrative linked to adverse experiences (Mehl-Madrona & Mainguy, 2022).

Indigenous Storywork as a Pathway to Healing and Recovery

Indigenous Storywork offers an ethical and relational pathway for addiction research and recovery work because it treats story as living knowledge rather than content to collect. Archibald's *Indigenous Storywork: Educating the Heart, Mind, Body, and Spirit* (2008) names seven guiding principles: respect, responsibility, reverence, reciprocity, holism, interrelatedness,

and synergy, and those principles shape how you listen, interpret, and respond to what you hear. Archibald writes, “the story becomes a teacher only when the listener is ready to learn and act upon its wisdom” (p. 111). In addiction research, this teaching stance matters because it moves you beyond describing harm toward supporting shifts in how people understand themselves, their relationships, and their futures.

Archibald (2008) developed this framework through sustained learning with Indigenous Elders and cultural knowledge holders, with strong roots in British Columbia, and the approach now travels across Indigenous and international learning contexts. These first principles -respect, responsibility, reverence, and reciprocity - guided me into the epistemology of story. They ask us to locate each narrative within its cultural context, to represent it with care, to treat it as more than a quote on a page, and to carry obligations to the people and communities who shared it (Archibald, 2008; Kovach, 2021; Smith, 2021; Wilson, 2008).

Archibald and Parent (2019) refine “Hand Back, Hands Forward” as a central pillar of Indigenous Storywork. They argue that this practice is a “relational way of being” (p. 5) that connects the storyteller to a larger temporal and spiritual lineage. For individuals healing from the “soul wound” of addiction, this method provides a structured path for meaning-making; the “hand back” represents the courage to reach into childhood trauma and ancestral memories to reclaim last teachings, while the “hand forward” represents the responsibility to share that recovered wisdom. By framing Storywork in this way, the authors suggest that personal recovery is never a solitary act; rather, it is a decolonizing methodology that “strengthens the web of relations” (Archibald & Parent, 2019, p.11), allowing one person’s journey toward wellness to become a medicine for the entire community. This orientation aligns with relational accountability in Indigenous research, where knowledge emerges through stories, how findings

are shared, and how benefits are returned to communities (Archibald, 2008; Atalay, 2019; Fellner, 2018; Parter et al., 2024; Smith, 2021). It also resonates with Tribal Critical Race Theory, which positions Indigenous knowledge as theory, centers sovereignty, and challenges educational and research structures that erase Indigenous presence (Brayboy, 2005).

Storytelling has long carried teachings across generations, and those teachings hold ethics, kinship responsibilities, and survival strategies, even when outsiders labeled them as folklore (TeHennepe, 1997; Thomas, 2005). However, as contemporary Indigenous scholarship asserts, these stories are not cultural artifacts but are dynamic methodologies for understanding the world. Central to this shift is the work of Phillips and Bunda (2018) who propose a paradigm of *Research Through, With, and As Storying*. This framework opposes the colonial perspective that views Indigenous experiences merely as "data" to be extracted. Instead, it emphasizes that storytelling is a sovereign and valuable research practice. This review examines how Indigenous authors use storytelling to reclaim their intellectual authority, arguing that these narratives are crucial for teaching and resisting conventional Western ways of knowing.

In *Decolonizing Research: Indigenous Storywork as Methodology* (2019), editors Archibald, Lee-Morgan, and De Santolo provide a transformative framework that centers Indigenous storytelling as a rigorous and sacred research practice. This text is foundational to my study because it shifts the perception of stories from data to powerful "story-medicine," capable of addressing the profound "soul wounds" created by poverty, displacement, and intergenerational trauma (Duran, 2006).

For our community, Storywork serves as a vital act of cultural reclamation. It enables us to weave together the narratives that colonial systems and cycles of substance use have sought to fracture. By applying Archibald’s principles of respect, responsibility, and holism, we honor our

community's lived experiences as legitimate sources of healing and leadership. This approach elevates the knowledge we gather but also ensures that the process itself is as restorative as the insights we seek. "It is time for us to go deeper into our own knowledge systems, deeper into our Storyworks. We must go beyond what has been 'discovered'; we must go beyond colonizing constraints of Western theories and paradigms" (Archibald et al., 2019, p. 11).

Moreover, within the context of addiction recovery, it is crucial to recognize that substance use often unfolds within narratives deeply influenced by factors such as poverty, displacement, and adverse childhood experiences (Johnson-Jennings et al., 2023). Understanding this context allows us to address the root causes of addiction and emphasizes the importance of storytelling as a means of healing and resilience. These conditions have a profound impact on individuals' physical and emotional well-being over time (Gutiérrez, 2024; Mehl-Madrona, 2022; Urrieta, 2019). They reestablish the capacity to articulate their experiences, the challenges they have faced, and the decisions they will make moving forward (Chan, 2021; Jonard et al., 2004).

While Archibald (2008) provides the principles of Storywork, Atalay (2019), in her article "*Braiding Strands of Wellness, How Repatriation Contributes to Healing through Embodied Practice and Storywork*," discusses how stories can become "embodied," enabling survivors to express the physical challenges associated with addiction and trauma that have previously constrained them. Sonya Atalay asserts that we often focus on the embodied practices involved in reclaiming identities, as well as the emotional and spiritual dimensions of this journey (p. 80). In her 2019 work, Atalay provides a critical framework for understanding Storywork as an "embodied practice" (p. 80). She highlights that survivors often struggle to articulate their experiences of trauma and addiction due to 'historical unresolved grief' stored in their bodies. By combining Storywork with land-based ceremonies and renewing connections to

their ancestors, individuals can “repatriate” their identities. This process goes beyond simply verbalizing experiences; it represents a spiritual “recommitment to the earth” (p. 78). Through this approach, individuals can transform narratives of damage into narratives of resilience, strength, and interconnectedness.

While Atalay (2019) emphasizes the embodied necessity of 'braiding' physical and spiritual wellness to articulate the challenges of trauma, this process is deeply anchored in relational accountability as defined by Wilson (2008). Reclaiming our identity from addiction is closely linked to restoring our connections to our Ancestors. By viewing recovery as a physical and spiritual 'homecoming,' we can then apply Archibald’s (2008) seven principles of storywork to ensure that the teller is not only healing their own 'soul wound’ (Duran, 2006) but is actively participating in a reciprocal cycle of collective wellness.

In this narrative reclamation, agency is supported, especially when recovery work invites people to move from a life shaped by shame and rupture toward a life shaped by responsibility and relations (Knott, 2019; Methot, 2019; Solomon & Wane, 2005). In *Legacy: Trauma, Story, and Indigenous Healing*, Methot (2019) names this shift with precision when she explains that recovery requires a movement toward agency, in which a person addresses the roots of addiction through a reclaimed narrative. Ultimately, this shift in perspective transforms the act of remembering from a source of pain into a foundational tool for personal and political sovereignty. Key concepts in the recovery process involve changing how individuals view their own stories about addiction within a framework of threat, power, and meaning. This includes exploring narratives about the nature of addiction and its consequences, creating future-oriented stories that reflect on healthy relationships and meaningful actions, and examining the intergenerational transmission of addiction (Duran, 2006; Mehl-Madrona, 2022; Mukosi, 2020;

Walls et al., 2016; Walters et al., 2010). This process acknowledges that individuals have the autonomy to define their own goals and what recovery means to them, in line with a harm-reduction approach. The … systemic invisibility of Indigenous people in the national narrative…" significantly impacts addiction and recovery (Smith, 2021, p. 1). Understanding how this invisibility is upheld is crucial for gaining a deeper insight into these issues (Johnson-Jennings et al., 2018; Smith, 2020; Walker, 2023).

Knott's (2019) *In My Own Moccasins: A Memoir of Resilience and Redemption* uses Indigenous Storywork to counter the systemic invisibility that shapes national narratives about addiction. According to Knott, the erasure of Indigenous identities and the dismissal of colonial histories do not just result from a passive omission but contribute to substance use. Knott's narrative becomes a form of direct counter-memory to the clinical and often dehumanizing "addict" archetype found in Western discourse, with her own journey through trauma and recovery. Through this lens, Knott emphasizes that for Indigenous peoples, recovery is inextricably connected to a reclamation of a stolen identity. She writes, "I am a collection of stories that were never meant to be told, living in a body that was never meant to survive" (p. 14). With this, Knott shows that making the Indigenous experience visible is integral to holistic healing and the decolonization of the recovery process.

Recognizing the importance of Indigenous storytelling and identity is vital for effectively supporting those in recovery (Campbell, 2022; Simpson, 2014; Smith, 2021). The inalienability of Indigenous identity and the wisdom embedded in Indigenous storytelling are critical elements in the recovery process (Battise, 2002; Brown, 2021; Chavarria, 2017; Smith, 2021). Indigenous philosophy suggests that our perceptions of the world are shaped by the stories we absorb (Cajete, 2000; Campbell, 2017; Cole, 2006; Deloria, 1979; Ermine, 2007; Mehl-Madrona, 2022).

Storywork is increasingly recognized as a crucial method for decolonizing mental health and addiction research within Indigenous treatments, while also helping to recenter Indigenous histories (Jonard et al., 2004; Martin, 2018; Smith, 2012; Vizenor, 2008). The impacts of colonization have profoundly affected the health and well-being of Indigenous peoples worldwide (Archibald et al., 2019; Fellner, 2018; Windchief & Cummins, 2021). By utilizing the art of storytelling, Storywork preserves culture and combats colonial oppression. By sharing stories that highlight the experiences and traditions of marginalized communities, Storywork keeps vital histories alive. It empowers those whose voices have been silenced, fostering strength and building connections. This practice ensures that narratives of resistance and survival are passed down to future generations, inspiring ongoing efforts toward justice and equality.

Land-Based Knowledge: Land, Story, and Reconnection

"Speaking Tree"

Some things on this earth are unspeakable:

Genealogy of the broken—

A shy wind threading leaves after a massacre,

Or the smell of coffee and no one there—

Some humans say trees are not sentient beings,

But they do not understand poetry—

Nor can they hear the singing of trees when they are fed by

Wind, or water music—

Or hear their cries of anguish when they are broken and bereft—

Now I am a woman longing to be a tree, planted in a moist, dark earth

Between sunrise and sunset—

I cannot walk through all realms—

I carry a yearning I cannot bear alone in the dark—

What shall I do with all this heartache?

The deepest-rooted dream of a tree is to walk.

Even just a little way, from the place next to the doorway—

To the edge of the river of life, and drink—

I have heard trees talking, long after the sun has gone down:

Imagine what it would be like to dance close together

In this land of water and knowledge . . .

To drink deep what is undrinkable.

From Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings by Joy Harjo[1].

This literature review seeks to understand how the reclamation of land-based practices becomes a radical reassertion of a holistic way of being that preserves ancestral histories and provides continuity to Indigenous life. As Robbins and Dewar (2011) and Redvers (2020) suggest, the connection to traditional landscapes plays a crucial role in personal recovery and serves as a pathway for reclaiming cultural identity. This relationship with the land goes beyond mere physical presence; it embodies a deep-rooted connection that plays a crucial role in recovery and self-discovery. This is in to contrast to conventional Western frameworks that often view the environment as a passive backdrop for human activity.

[1] Permission granted by the author to include this poem in my dissertation.

At the beginning of this chapter, I selected "Speaking Tree" by Joy Harjo (2015) because it speaks directly to the intellectual and spiritual core of this work, the insistence that land, story, and living beings are bound together in a single, breathing relational system that Indigenous land-based scholarship has always known to be true. Harjo, as a Muscogee (Creek) Nation poet and former U.S. Poet Laureate, writes from within a tradition that understands trees, wind, and water as sentient participants in the world, not passive resources or convenient metaphors. The poem's central tension a woman longing to be rooted like a tree, while a tree longs to walk and drink from the river of life mirrors the displacement and yearning at the heart of land-based reconnection: the grief of severance, and the deep somatic memory of belonging to a place. "Speaking Tree" serves this thesis as more than literary evidence; it functions as a theoretical and spiritual framework that insists knowledge lives in relationship, in the body, and in the land itself. Harjo's assertion that those who deny tree sentience "do not understand poetry" is also a quiet but firm critique of Western epistemologies that have historically dismissed Indigenous ways of knowing as unscientific or illegitimate. By centering this poem within the scholarship, this work honors the land-based intellectual tradition from which it draws and affirms that story like roots are how knowledge travels across generations, drought, and rupture.

In "*Place in Research: Theory, Methodology, and Methods*," Tuck and McKenzie (2015) argue that land is a physical space and a pedagogical force, a teacher and a relative that carries the histories and futures of its people. This research shifts the perspective away from a settler-colonial view, where land is seen as a commodity or static setting, to recognize it as a vital component of the healing process. Therefore, self-discovery becomes an outward journey of reconnecting with specific spatial and cultural geographies that define where and how an individual belongs; it is not simply an inner experience.

In the edited collection *Re-Indigenizing Ecological Consciousness and the Interconnectedness to Indigenous Identities*, Montgomery (2023) and others argue that restoring Indigenous wellness rests on the reclamation of an ecological identity. This work directly supports the premise that land-based practices constitute active resistance to colonial impacts, particularly in the realm of addiction recovery. Indigenous communities can take a step beyond clinical treatment by revitalizing traditional methodologies under the guidance of knowledge holders within a holistic model of "re-indigenization." This process acknowledges that healing from addiction is fundamentally tied to the restoration of the interconnectedness between the individual, their cultural heritage, and the ancestral lands they inhabit.

In *Kaandossiwin: How We Come to Know,* Absolon (2022) argues that for Indigenous peoples, gathering knowledge, be it for research or to recover from loss, is an embodied spiritual journey that must be focused on the self and the land. Absolon's work serves as the structural "how-to" in identifying themes of resistance and revitalization. By abandoning Western, linear models of inquiry, Absolon's "Petal Flower" methodology opens up space in which culture, relationship, and environmental connection become not just variables but the bedrock of a holistic life. This methodology is premised on the need to "locate oneself": people must be guided to place their identity, history, and spirit in relation to the land (Absolon, 2022, pp. 8-10).

Bridging the work of Absolon (2022) and Montgomery (2023), Kimmerer (2013) explores how language and story constitute a connective tissue between human spirit and the living world. In *Braiding Sweetgrass,* Kimmerer argues that storytelling is more than a cultural hobby; it is also a key "grammar of animacy" that reconnects the land to people. For those grappling with the complexities of healing and addiction, Kimmerer's work emphasizes that stories are a type of "medicine" that can remake a shattered sense of self. In narrating tales about

the land, the speaker is acknowledging the humanity of the natural world, from the experience of segregation to a sense of mutual community.

Storytelling serves as the means of transformation that enables one to reshape and rewrite their own past within the greater, ever-enduring story of the land they come from. This act of 're-storying' means that, rather than merely a lack of struggle, recovery is about having a profound storied relationship to the earth that still supports life. Hence, storytelling is foundational to successful land-based approaches, providing a spiritual and emotional map that enables a holistic pathway toward wellness and restorative justice. Kimmerer (2013) argues that "restoring land without restoring relationship is an empty exercise. It is a relationship that will endure and sustain the restored land" (p. 338).

In *Theory of Water: Nishnaab Maps to the Times Ahead",* Simpson (2025) introduces water as a metaphor for the fluid, persistent, and transformative nature of Indigenous intelligence and resurgence. Indigenous ways of knowing are seen as akin to water as systems that cannot simply be described as static and isolated from the current. Simpson's framework resonates with global Indigenous perspectives that conceptualize land as an agent of physical nourishment and as the basis for spiritual and communal healing, within land-based healing systems.

While Simpson highlights the "flow" of intelligence, Johnson-Jennings et al. (2020) focus on grounding a targeted medicine in cultural revitalization to address historical trauma and systemic health disparities. Centralizing the Choctaw idea of the land as a source of "spiritual and physical nourishment" (p. 400), Johnson-Jennings demonstrates how world-class land-based initiatives routinely employ cultural reclamation to restore the health of their communities.

The collective scholarship of Absolon, Simpson, and Johnson-Jennings provides a comprehensive ecosystem for understanding Indigenous health and recovery. Through Absolon's

Petal Flower methodology, the importance of "locating oneself" within the land is established as the necessary starting point for any healing journey, ensuring the practitioner is rooted in relational accountability. Simpson's Theory of Water adds a dynamic layer to this foundation, framing land-based healing as a fluid and persistent act of resurgence that flows through colonial barriers to restore community agency. Finally, Johnson-Jennings et al. (2020) translates these spiritual and philosophical concepts into a transformative framework for health equity, proving that cultural revitalization and ecological reconnection are the most effective interventions for addressing historical trauma

These initiatives promote decolonized relationships with both the environment and oneself, facilitating a healing process related to one's sense of place and identity. Notably, they advocate for holistic healing by emphasizing ecological connections and fostering human-ecological well-being within the community (Johnson-Jennings et al., 2020; Simpson, 2025). Integrating these culturally relevant methods into healing strategies improves individual well-being while strengthening resilience within Indigenous communities. In *Grandmother Cedar as Educator: Teacher Learning Through Native Knowledges and Sovereignty Curriculum*, Hardison-Stevens (2014) argues that Indigenous knowing depends on stories bequeathed to the next generation for them to voice who we are in life. Regarding addiction recovery, the Cedar tree acts as a primary narrative anchor; in re-learning the stories and protocols of the Cedar, Indigenous youth evolve from a state of cultural 'silence' to a state of 'voiced legacy,' which serves as a significant protective factor against substance use disorders.

In "*Native Science: Natural Laws of Interdependence*, Cajete (2000) asserts that Indigenous knowledge is a lived relationship with the natural world, governed by the principles of harmony and reciprocity. This perspective frames the land as a living entity with which

humans share a profound psychological and spiritual bond. According to Cajete, healing is achieved through the "Search for Life," a process that requires individuals to reconnect with their ancestral territories and the natural laws that sustain them.

Reconnecting with ancestral and cultural heritage is crucial for strengthening resilience and preventing substance use disorders, particularly among Indigenous youth (Chavarria, 2017; Christian & Wong, 2017). Sharing personal stories about our relationships with the land and our connections to ancestral territories is an important part of this process. These stories serve as more than historical accounts; they are the spiritual threads that bind a community to its environment. By articulating these connections, Indigenous peoples reclaim their cultural identity and pursue restorative justice by reclaiming their lands. This literature review highlights how Cajete's work reinforces the "search" for wellness as an act of re-establishing interdependence, where the land and the story are essential partners in the transformative journey of recovery.

Where Cajete sets up the philosophical basis for interdependence, Wildcat (2009) carries this "Native Science" through to the practice of practical Indigenuity and suggests that healing is a proactive engagement with the environment. Wildcat argues that the environment's (ecological and social) climate is restored through the intentional practice of Storywork. This is a disciplined practice of using stories to establish ancestral "instruction manuals" to live well on the land. Individuals do not memorize their history but actively re-story their current lives in Storywork so their recovery and the recovery of the territory are not completely disconnected. The shift from theory to practice underscores that wellness is a lived experience, enabling the reclamation of land through the reclamation of the Indigenous mind through the spoken word.

In *On Indigenuity: Learning the Lessons of Mother Earth,* Wildcat (2009) introduced the concept of "Indigenuity" as the utilization of the natural laws described by Cajete. According to Wildcat, Mother Earth is the primary teacher, and wellness lies in the ability to hear her lessons and learn from her. In this context, Storywork is the critical bridge between ancestral wisdom and contemporary recovery. By sharing narratives rooted in the land, individuals practice a form of intellectual and spiritual sovereignty. This process shifts land-based healing into what we might refer to as restorative justice, as reclaiming territory and reclaiming health, and seeking health equity based on traditional knowledge, is a process of applying traditional wisdom to the problems of the present.

When individuals and communities are separated from their traditional lands, it disrupts their identities and perpetuates cycles of trauma and addiction. Therefore, reconnecting with the land is a crucial step in the healing process. It provides essential opportunities for recovery, offering both symbolic and practical benefits.

The Pedagogy of the Seed and the Root

The Cottonwood releases seeds wrapped in a soft, white down, often called "seed storm." These seeds are fragile yet meant to travel very far, so learners are learning that recovery involves a reciprocal journey. As the seed needs wind to carry it and the riverbank to catch it, so the recovery person needs the breath of the community to find a safe harbor, a place to land, and grow. This parallels HeavyRunner and Morris' (1997) assertion of the cultural resilience that characterizes addiction by pointing to the natural supports of kinship as the primary protective factors against addiction. From a land-based perspective, addiction is a condition of being stuck or static, whereas Cottonwood represents the movement toward a new beginning, a process nurtured by the invisible forces of tradition.

While there is evidence of the recovery from addiction in Indigenous communities, the research needs to move from the clinical mode to the relational (Gone, 2013). The Cottonwood tree (see Figure 4), as a pedagogical map, shows us that the process of wellness is about re-rooting to a place, in the midst of colonial displacement.

Figure 4

Come and Listen to Me. I am Cottonwood Women

Note. Photo by Valentina Sireech (2025)

When the land is used as the co-teacher, the process of recovery is so much more than the cessation of substance use; it is the healing of the self (Kirmayer et al., 2011). Because of the

“inner star” of intrinsic value, the spiritual foundation noted by Durie (2004), and the community wind provided by kinship and land-based practices, land-based practices address the causes of disconnection. In this way, the renewal of Indigenous connections to their land is not just an additive treatment; it is the bedrock on which a resilient, sober, and culturally vibrant future can be built.

Rethinking Trauma and Addiction: Healing with Stories

The Healer

While working on a project with an indigenous individual who had been diagnosed as schizophrenic, I gained a profoundly insightful perspective. He explained,

> *The voices I hear are actually good spirits. They whisper possibilities, things that could happen, both good and bad. In the old days, before reservations and all the changes we have experienced, I would have been recognized as a medicine man, a healer, someone who is connected to the spirits and capable of guiding our people. However, now, instead of receiving that honor, I am told I have a mental illness.'*
>
> *His words highlighted the complexity of identity and the shift in societal perceptions of traditional roles and wisdom.*

Psychiatric practice has historically underserved Indigenous people, often with cultural invariance of disorders (Dickerson et al., 2014; Duran, 2006; Gutiérrez, 2022; Linklater, 2014; Methot, 2019; Walls et al., 2016). As Waldram (2004) argues, many conventional mental health constructs are colonial impositions that construct the Indigenous mind through a lens of deficit and dysfunction rather than cultural reality. Acknowledging Indigenous perspectives on mind and mental health is crucial (Duran, 2066; Mehl-Madrona & Mainguy, 2022; Solomon & Wane, 2005). Effective healing for Indigenous individuals requires a fundamental shift away from

Western mental health models that historically pathologize Indigenous experience. Approaches aligning with an individual's worldview are essential for treatment (McVicker & Pourier, 2005). However, Linklater's (2014) *Decolonizing Trauma Work: Indigenous Stories and Strategies* argues that mainstream psychiatric approaches often fail because they impose a Western lens that can be "dissonant" with the patient's lived reality and ancestral knowledge. Healing, therefore, is not about "fixing" a person's symptoms; it is about reconnecting that individual to their culture and community.

Linklater (2014) asserts that approaches aligned with an individual's worldview are essential for treatment (p. 25). Indigenous cultures around the world share key ideas, even though they differ in many ways. They emphasize a sense of connection to others, value group goals over individual ones, and often use stories to pass on knowledge. Additionally, they approach life in a way that encompasses physical, mental, social, and spiritual aspects, usually represented by the Four Cardinal Directions (Linklater, 2014). Linklater argues that trauma disrupts balance, often pulling an individual too far in one direction (such as the emotional weight of the south). Decolonizing trauma work involves moving around the wheel to ensure the *Mental, Emotional, Physical, and Spiritual* are all addressed, rather than treating the "mind" as a Western clinical approach might (Linklater, 2014, pp. 85-87). By using the Four Cardinal Directions (see Figure 5), which address the mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual realms, practitioners can move toward a holistic model of wellness.

Figure 5 *Four Cardinal Directions*

Indigenous philosophies remind us that our understanding of the world is deeply influenced by the stories we embrace or create. Unfortunately, the shadows of European colonialism continue to affect Indigenous communities today, leading to profound personal and communal pain through displacement. However, despite these challenges—ranging from genocide to ongoing racism, Indigenous peoples have demonstrated remarkable resilience. This strength often comes through Ancestral and modern healing practices, which nurture both personal growth and community survivance. Drawing on Smith's (2012) insights in *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (2012), survivance becomes a conscious decision to reclaim our narratives and actively shape the futures we aspire to create.

Addressing these interconnected issues requires recognizing diverse perspectives on mental well-being and mental health (Johnson-Jennings et al., 2018; Linklater, 2014). It is essential to integrate various addiction treatment models and to establish connections with

cultural heritage and traditional spiritual practices. Such connections can significantly enhance resilience and empowerment within Indigenous communities, particularly through the application of Indigenous Storywork.

Indigenous Worldview: Healing and Spiritual Connection, Memories, Dreams

Grandfather's Rainbow

When I was a child, my mother told me a story about how my great-grandfather, Jim Wash Accawanna, walked into the Rainbow. He was our Tribe's Sundance Chief, Bear Dance Chief, a spiritual leader for the Peyote meetings, and a Medicine Man, Healer. At the time, I was still caught in a colonized way of seeing the world, unable to fully understand the depth of what she was telling me. When I heard his name, my mind jumped to the only reference I had—to the Lucky Charms cereal box, the cartoonish leprechaun, the rainbow I had been taught was nothing more than a sugary symbol of luck. I did not yet know how to see through the layers of colonial distortion, how to recognize the knowledge my mother was passing down. What do you mean? I asked, waiting for her to continue. She closed her eyes, as if reaching across time, as if pulling the memory from a place beyond words, and began:

When I was a child, I lived with my grandparents in a small cabin by the river, surrounded by tall cottonwood trees. I lived there because my father was an alcoholic, and my mother was trapped in an abusive home. My grandparents took me in. I was the oldest of twelve children, but my siblings stayed behind. Every morning, I would wake to the sound of my grandmother placing wood into the stove, making coffee, the scent filling the small cabin. We would eat leftover frybread with buffalo berry jam for breakfast, the best breakfast in the whole wide world.

One morning, before the sun had fully risen, I asked my grandmother in Ute, 'Where is Grandfather?' She answered softly, "He is outside, praying and fanning himself off." That morning, the sky was still heavy from the storm the night before. The rain had pounded against the cabin, shaking its walls, making me wonder if the roof would fly away. However, now, the storm had passed. The air was thick with the scent of wet earth. The clouds stretched in heavy layers of gray and white, and the sun was slowly pushing its way through. I stepped outside, searching for my grandfather, but I could not see him.

I walked up the dirt path to the road, then climbed a small hill of loose rock. When I reached the top, I looked down toward the cottonwood grove—and that is when I saw him. My grandfather was walking straight into a rainbow. A complete, brilliant arc stretched across the sky, and he stepped directly into its light. And then—he was gone. For a moment, time did not exist. Maybe it was a second, maybe an hour—I stood frozen, waiting, my breath caught between wonder and fear. Then, just as suddenly as he had disappeared, he walked out again. I ran back to the house, my heart pounding, but I told no one. Not my grandmother. Not my grandfather.

That entire day, I never left his side. Wherever he went, I followed. And every so often, he would look at me and smile as if acknowledging the quiet secret we now shared. We never spoke of it, but I carried that moment with me through my childhood and through the years that followed. Even when my parents came to take me back, I knew that if things ever got too hard, if life ever became unbearable, I could escape into the rainbow with my grandfather. That land, the cabin, the cottonwoods, the river—was more than a place. It was a portal, a refuge, a knowing. It held me in ways no person could. It showed me something more profound than words."

As an older woman, I can retell my mother's story. I felt a shift within me; I was not just hearing her memory. I was experiencing it. The land had witnessed her, just as it had witnessed

my great-grandfather, and is now witnessing me. This story was not just about my grandfather walking into a rainbow but about the interconnection between land, spirit, and memory. It was about understanding—understanding as our Ancestors did, in a way that does not require proof because it resides in the land itself.

Absolon (2011) reminds us that "all of this locating is about re-storying oneself, making one's story visible, and sharing stories about how one comes to know" (pp. 10-18). This reflects how I came to understand my identity. It is through my mother's voice, through the footsteps of my great-grandfather that disappeared into the rainbow, and through the land that carries the weight of our stories. The land remembers us even when we forget to remember ourselves. It will always remember us.

Writing this story holds significant meaning for me as it underscores the deep connection between land and memory at the core of my work. For many years, I struggled to understand my mother's narrative about my great-grandfather as I was growing up. It was not until I enrolled in a doctoral program that I began to perceive this story in a new light. I realized that memory, witness, and healing are intricately tied to the land itself. By understanding just one facet of this narrative, I came to recognize that my identity and the journey of my healing are inextricably linked to my cultural roots. This connection goes beyond mere geography; it encompasses the living stories that resonate within that land.

Through the lens of my personal experiences, which also inform my scholarly pursuits, I have been empowered to recount my history on my own terms and within the context of my Ancestral land. I actively challenge colonial narratives and advocate for the significance of Indigenous ways of knowing. This belief is foundational to my research: land and memory are dynamic entities that play a crucial role in healing and transformation. In my own practice, I

integrate this understanding by engaging with the land and its stories, fostering a more profound connection that informs both my writing and my community work, ultimately enriching the healing journey for myself and others.

The journey toward recovery for Indigenous individuals necessitates a profound shift toward Indigenous worldviews that center on wholeness, relationality, and spiritual sovereignty. Within this framework, addiction is understood as a symptom of spiritual and cultural disconnection resulting from historical and ongoing colonization. Healing is found in the restorative power of traditional knowledge, where the integration of memory, dreams, and ancestral wisdom serves as a compass for reconnecting to the self.

Central to this process is Indigenous Storywork (Archibald, 2008), a methodology that goes beyond simple narration to become a transformative tool for capturing and honoring lived experiences. By engaging with Storywork, individuals can bridge the gap between the physical and spiritual worlds, transforming the recovery process into a sacred act of re-Indigenization. In this context, the individual is recognized as a person and relative returning to their rightful place within the circle of their culture, community, and ancestry.

In "*Toward a redefinition of Indian education*", Hampton (1995) transforms conventional notions of Indigenous success by characterizing knowledge as one that is interwoven with spiritual relationality and ancestral memory. His work suggests that genuine change, whether in an educational setting or during the recovery from addiction, cannot occur without the support for effective medical or practical solutions. Hampton posits that healing is a process of reclaiming one's identity. In this context, the "spirit" acts as a fundamental reference point for assessing well-being. Regarding addiction, this perspective shifts the focus from mere sobriety to a strength-based model that emphasizes reconnection to oneself. In honoring dreams as a guide

and memory as a means to maintain cultural resilience, Hampton offers a model in which healing is a spiritual “coming home” to an Indigenous identity that colonization sought to break apart.

The blending of spiritual standards from Hampton (1995) and clinical practices from *Healing the Soul Wound: Counseling with American Indians and Other Native Peoples* (Duran, 2006) provides a framework for understanding Indigenous recovery as a process of spiritual reclamation. While Hampton argues that spirituality and memory represent critical standards for Indigenous growth, Duran applies these conceptualizations to the treatment of addiction by discerning the "soul wound" or deep, intergenerational trauma created by disconnections resulting from colonization (p. 17). Healing here is more than one-off behavior change; it is a return to the “sacred circle” through the activation of dreams and ancestral memory. Duran's work demonstrates that dreams actually bridge the gap between spiritual worlds, provide guidance, and ground that helps an individual externalize the spirit of addiction (Duran, 2006). By anchoring the recovery process in these traditional ways of knowing, your work moves beyond Western symptom management, instead focusing on grounding the individual in a resilient ancestral narrative that fosters long-term, holistic wellness.

The work of Pihama and Smith in *Honoré: Addressing Trauma and Cultural Healing in Māori Communities* (2019) further refines the application of Indigenous worldviews to addiction by situating the 'soul wound' within the specific colonial history of Aotearoa (Duran, 2006). Smith (2019) emphasizes that healing requires decolonizing the mind, in which the individual reclaims their narrative through the activation of cultural memory and Whakapapa (genealogy/lineage). Complementing this, Pihama (2019) identifies trauma as a symptom of unresolved historical grief that has severed the connection between the individual and their spiritual life force. They argue that healing is a destination achieved solely through clinical

abstinence, but a transformative process of 'remembering' one’s inherent mana. This perspective is crucial to my work as it shifts the therapeutic focus from managing personal failures to facilitating a collective reclamation of spirit and identity, using traditional knowledge as the primary remedy for intergenerational trauma.

While Smith and Pihama (2019) highlight the importance of decolonizing the narrative around addiction, the process of reclaiming one’s identity often goes beyond intellectual discussions. It delves into the subconscious and spiritual realms. This shift from overcoming structural resistance to fostering internal healing is effectively articulated through "Dream Methodology," as discussed in Walter's (2010) work, *Reconceptualizing Native Women's Health: An “Indigenist” Stress-Coping Model*. If we view addiction as a symptom of disconnection from one's spirit and history, then the concept of the 'dream space' becomes essential for re-establishing that connection and facilitating healing.

Although Walters et al. (2010) offer internal means of accessing ancestral directives through the 'Dream Methodology,’ in *God Is Red: A Native View of Religion,* Deloria (1979/2003) provides the cosmic and spatial context in which those dreams reside. He takes the conversation outside the psychological, suggesting that Indigenous spirituality is not a human invention but a relationship to the literal power of the land and the sacredness of particular places. This transformation is key to recovery from addiction: while Walters’ emphasis is on the ‘dreaming spirit’ as a source of data, Deloria argues that these visions are rooted in the earth’s eternal memory, meaning that the memories and dreams someone encounters are not just personal reflections but rather, anchored in a spatial sovereignty that creates a living, spiritual geography for the individual in healing. Deloria offers theological evidence that rooting a person in their ancestral land is the ultimate act of spiritual stabilization.

The concept of Spatial Sovereignty, as explored by Deloria (2003), applies to the methodology of Storywork. If Deloria establishes that memory is grounded in the land, then Storywork—as formulated by Archibald (2008)—is the medium through which those memories are activated for healing. The seven principles of Storywork are respect, responsibility, reciprocity, reverence, holism, interrelatedness, and synergy. In addiction recovery, storytelling the self enables the person to transition from a fragmented, trauma-laden story to a joined, spirit-centered self. From its incorporation of the power of place (Deloria), alongside the power of the oral tradition (Archibald), the healing process is a remapping of the self onto the sacred landscape. In my work, this means that every dream, every memory, every story the Individual shares is a 'map' that provides direction toward the strength of this collective and a pathway away from the isolation of addiction.

Reframing Art Pedagogy for Healing and Reclaiming

Scholarship on Indigenous visual narratives increasingly treats art as a record, a refusal, and a form of relational instruction (Simpson, 2017; Vizenor, 2008). Within this work, images operate as truth-telling practices that name colonial violence and trace its ongoing presence in bodies, families, and lands (Goeman, 2013; Secaria, 2019). This literature review examines how Indigenous artists and scholars position visual storytelling as a decolonial methodology for confronting historical trauma, land displacement, environmental crisis, and substance use. Across the sources, visual narrative emerges as a form of *survivance*, an active presence that resists absence and reasserts Indigenous continuance (Vizenor, 2008). You see a consistent argument: when art carries memory with care, it also carries a pathway toward repair.

Visual Narratives as Decolonial Tools

Indigenous visual narrative scholarship also foregrounds aesthetics as governance, relationship, and futurity more than as surface or decoration. Charlie (2016) frames Indigenous aesthetics as lifeways toward vibrant futurities in *Sók Neyni'įn. Marvels & Tales*, seeing visual practice as one of many speaking back to oppressive structures and interrupting colonial common sense. In this context, the picture materializes injustices that are often lost from historical stories, made invisible or absent, euphemized, and silenced by institutions. Charlie's *Indigenous Collage Theory* provides a strict vocabulary for this work. She characterizes collage as both form and theory, encouraging artists and viewers to sit with fragmented realities produced by historical and ongoing colonialism (Charlie, 2016, p. 112). In a literature review on trauma and substance use, this fragmentation is significant.

In *Kent Monkman: Life & Work,* Madill (2022), further elucidates visual storytelling as one that confronts colonial history by entering the canon and rejecting its limits. Scholarship on Monkman highlights his attention to how Western art history generally lacked space for "history painting" to validate Indigenous experience. Madill describes Monkman's work as a venture into the emotional core of lived experience, a resistant counterpoint to the lack of representation of Indigenous-centered realities in canonical forms. Through Miss Chief Eagle Testickle, Monkman presents critique within the museum's visual language, reimagining the scale and authority of European painting to reveal residential school trauma and forced relocation as national rather than private histories. This tactic reframes the gallery as an environment where Indigenous presence is speaking its truth through the lens of what institutions would rather cover up.

Museums, Archives, and Truth-telling as Community Necessity

The literature also positions museums and archives as contested spaces in which Native communities experience both damage and potential for healing. In the article, *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums,* Lonetree (2012), describes museums as painful sites that are intertwined with colonization and argued that decolonizing practice will require supporting communities who have been left with unresolved grief (Lonetree, 2012). She also connects historical knowledge with courageous healing, and the interdependence of past and present as a condition of community refreshment. Visual exhibitions serve as truth-telling spaces and have ethical responsibility for living communities in this collection of research, where representation matters to the community.

Visual Sovereignty and Indigenous Wellness Beyond Biomedical Language

In *Image-based storytelling: A visual narrative of my family's story*, Boivin (2018) extends this argument to health, a field in which narrative authority often remains tightly circumscribed by clinical models. Boivin juxtaposes a Dene idea of wellness against a medical model, with land relationship establishing wellness as the metric; removal from land reframed how disability and unwellness became legible within colonial systems. She also identifies a fear of oversimplification — that images flatten context and knowledge within them, trapping loved ones in print. This caution amplifies the methodological stakes in the literature review. A visual narrative provides a relational language for wellness, grief, and substance use that is difficult to condense into lists of symptoms. It also requires interpretive humility, because images have multilayered knowledge that text frequently compresses.

Land Displacement, Environmental Crisis, and Visual "Artivism"

All Indigenous visual narrative literature systematically associates land displacement with environmental catastrophe, framing these two as continuations of colonial extraction. Galanin (2025), for example, brings this approach to his work, entering colonial space and power dynamics. Works like *Never Forget* also re-narrate public landscapes through the lenses of policing, surveillance, and settler authority, with sharp symbolic juxtapositions ranging from riot gear to religious imagery to critique. Galanin's meditations on empire and time further enrich this critique. As he contrasts the short life of empires versus the long life of Indigenous cultural survival, using "older than empire" to remind us of the transience of social time, and the survival that continues after it (Galanin, 2025), in an interview mode. Moreover, this framing is relevant for climate conversation itself, because it defies the notion that environmental collapse is new. In *Is it colonial déjà vu? Indigenous peoples and climate injustice*, Whyte (2016) names climate change as colonial déjà vu, an intensification of dispossession instigated during colonization.

In this scholarly project, Indigenous visual narratives present the climate crisis as lived history, inscribed in the land's scars and in the restructuring of daily subsistence. Fujikane (2021), in *Mapping abundance for a planetary future: Kanaka Maoli and critical settler cartographies in Hawai'i,* calls for displacing colonial maps of scarcity to favor Indigenous economies of abundance, aligning visually with narrative strategies that redraw territory as relationship rather than ownership. This literature stresses how environmental art communicates through an archive of sensory experience and is understood as producing knowledge by interpreting ecological interruption as experienced knowledge, in which grief, responsibility, and obligation are mediated by form rather than by data alone.

Trauma, Substance Use, and Art-based Interventions

A central thread across the literature links historical trauma to contemporary health outcomes, including substance use, while rejecting explanations that isolate individuals from the colonial context. In *Conceptualizing and Measuring Historical Trauma among American Indian People,* Whitbeck et al. (2004) show connections between historical trauma thoughts and substance use, supporting the claim that unresolved collective grief travels into present coping patterns and risk behaviors. Within this frame, galleries and community art spaces operate as truth-telling sites where grief gains language and witnesses. This work aligns with Lonetree's (2012) argument that decolonizing practice involves addressing unresolved grief as a living legacy rather than a concluded chapter.

Recent intervention research adds an applied dimension. According to Motta-Ochoa and colleagues (2024), "Evidence about art-based interventions for Indigenous people: A scoping review protocol" (p. 3), their scoping review protocol aimed to map evidence about art-based interventions for Indigenous people, with a focus on codesigned approaches like body mapping and visual storytelling that support substance use disorder treatment and center on holistic, land-based healing. Motta-Ochoa et al. position visual narrative as both a method and a form of medicine, where creative making is structured to help reorganize memory, reconnect individuals with land-based identity, and restore relationships. For communities navigating substance use, such practices support meaning-making without collapsing complexity into pathology.

My Work

Art has always been a sacred language for Indigenous peoples a way to document history, honor our ancestors, and reflect the transformations within our communities. As a Northern Ute artist, I carry this tradition forward, blending traditional methods with contemporary media to tell

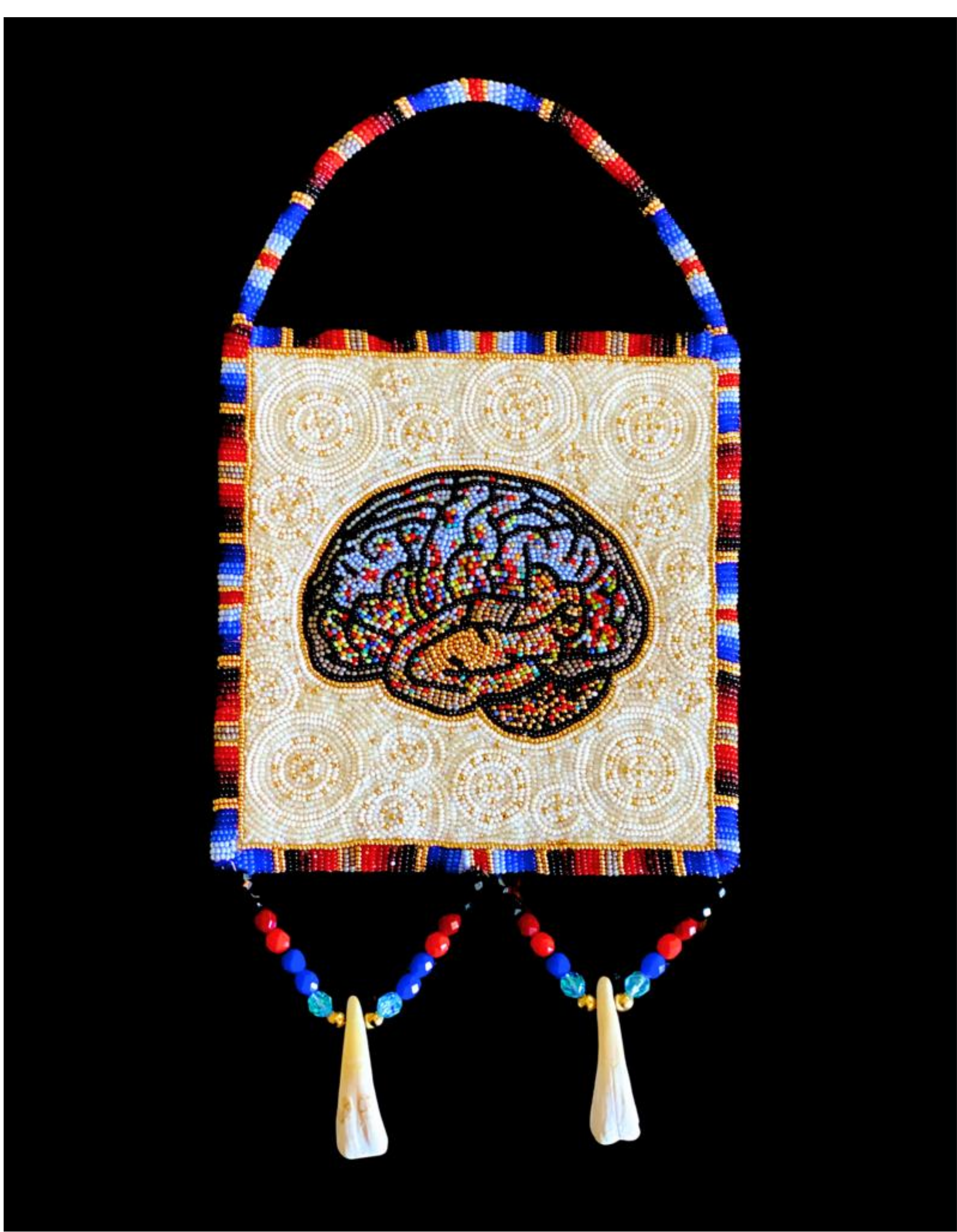
stories of resilience, healing, and recovery. My artistic journey is deeply personal and profoundly connected to the struggles and strengths of my people, particularly in confronting the impacts of addiction and intergenerational trauma.

My practice bridges the tactile intimacy of traditional materials with the layered complexity of digital media. In works, like Figure 6,*"Hooked: Breaking the Silence of Stigma,"* I use Charlotte True Cut beads, buffalo teeth, smoked deer hide, and crystal beads to reflect the balance between vulnerability and strength. This piece explores the emotional and physical impact of addiction while celebrating the brain's ability to heal. By using materials with cultural significance, I hope to foster conversations about the stigma of Substance Use Disorder in tribal communities and highlight the need for communal understanding and support.

In my digital mixed-media pieces, like *"Becoming a Matriarch"* and *"From the Ashes: Stories of Recovery,"* I create layered narratives that intertwine past, present, and future. These works feature symbols such as the eagle, representing strength and spiritual guidance, and blue orbs that signify the presence of ancestors. Gold frames are used to reclaim Indigenous stories from a colonial lens, emphasizing the sovereignty of our narratives. Blurred or faded background images evoke memories of childhood and intergenerational trauma, grounding each piece in the larger context of healing and transformation.

In Figure 7, *"Becoming a Matriarch"* celebrates the strength of Indigenous women as they reclaim their roles as leaders and healers in their families and communities. By depicting a confident figure surrounded by ancestral symbols, I honor the resilience needed to break cycles of addiction and rebuild connections. Similarly, Figure 8, *"From the Ashes,"* tells a story of personal recovery, guided by familial spirits and cultural practices such as the Sundance ceremony, highlighting recovery as a sacred and spiritual process.

Figure 6 *Hooked: Breaking the Silence of Stigma*



Note. Photo by Valentina R. Sireech, 2023

Figure 7 *Becoming a Matriarch*

Note. Photo by Valentina R. Sireech, 2024

Figure 8

From the Ashes

Note. Photo by Valentina Sireech, 2024

My work expresses personal and cultural identity and serves as a call to action. It challenges viewers to confront the stigma of addiction, recognize the lasting effects of colonization, and honor the resilience within Indigenous communities. Each piece invites reflection, healing, and connection, seeing recovery not only as a personal journey but as a collective reclamation of our stories, traditions, and strength. Through my art, I aim to create space for dialogue, healing, and cultural reclamation. I hope my work inspires others to see recovery as a transformative journey of resilience, rooted in the interconnectedness of land, spirit, and community. Above all, my creations are acts of love and devotion to my people, honoring the past while envisioning a future of hope and healing.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This chapter presents the methodological framework for exploring how Indigenous Storywork (Archibald, 2008), Land-Based Knowledge, and Visual Narrative Art intersect in addiction research and recovery. While traditional Western research often frames addiction in terms of deficits and pathology, this study takes a different approach by centering a "Spirit-stories" perspective on memory and dreams (Duran, 2006). In this chapter, I describe the methodological path I follow to understand the dynamic connections among Indigenous Storywork, personal narratives, visual art, and pathways to healing from substance use. Instead of depending on Western clinical models that frequently portray Indigenous life through a lens of pathology and scarcity, I ground this study in a decolonial and transformative framework (Caetano et al., 2003; Dickerson et al., 2014). Here, land, spirit, and narrative are fundamental, illustrating how recovery in Indigenous communities grows from relationship, responsibility, and remembrance (Absolon, 2022; Archibald, 2008; Atalay, 2019; Smith, 2012).

The Cottonwood Metaphor

To structure this research design, I draw upon the metaphor of the Cottonwood tree. The Cottonwood serves as a conceptual map illustrating how knowledge flows through various layers of time (Simpson, 2014). Its roots symbolize land-based knowledge, ancestral presence, and historical forces contributing to disconnection. The trunk represents oral narratives, encompassing interviews with others and my firsthand experiences. The tree rings reflect temporality and intergenerational memory, highlighting cyclical patterns of both harm and healing. The bark serves as a metaphor for protection, boundaries, and ethical responsibilities. The branches denote relationships and communal connections integral to the recovery process.

Lastly, the leaves represent the everyday practices of healing, while the seeds are artistic representations that narrate our stories with pride, respect, and purpose.

The Roots System of Healing

The Cottonwood tree serves as the central metaphor for this methodology. In many Indigenous traditions, Cottonwood is considered a living relative who breathes with the community (HeavyRunner & Morris, 1997; Kimmerer, 2013). Its roots reach for the life-giving waters of tradition and ancestral teachings, while its branches extend into the realm of dreams, spirit, and unseen knowledge passed through generations (Holmes, 2000). In this study, Cottonwood becomes a conceptual map, with its roots representing ancestral and land-based knowledge, its trunk symbolizing the strength and continuity of shared and personal narratives, and its seeds representing visual art as carriers of story, fostering self-determination, and bringing healing to future generations (Absolon, 2022; Curtice, 2025; Silko, 1977).

Research Design: Relational and Visual Art

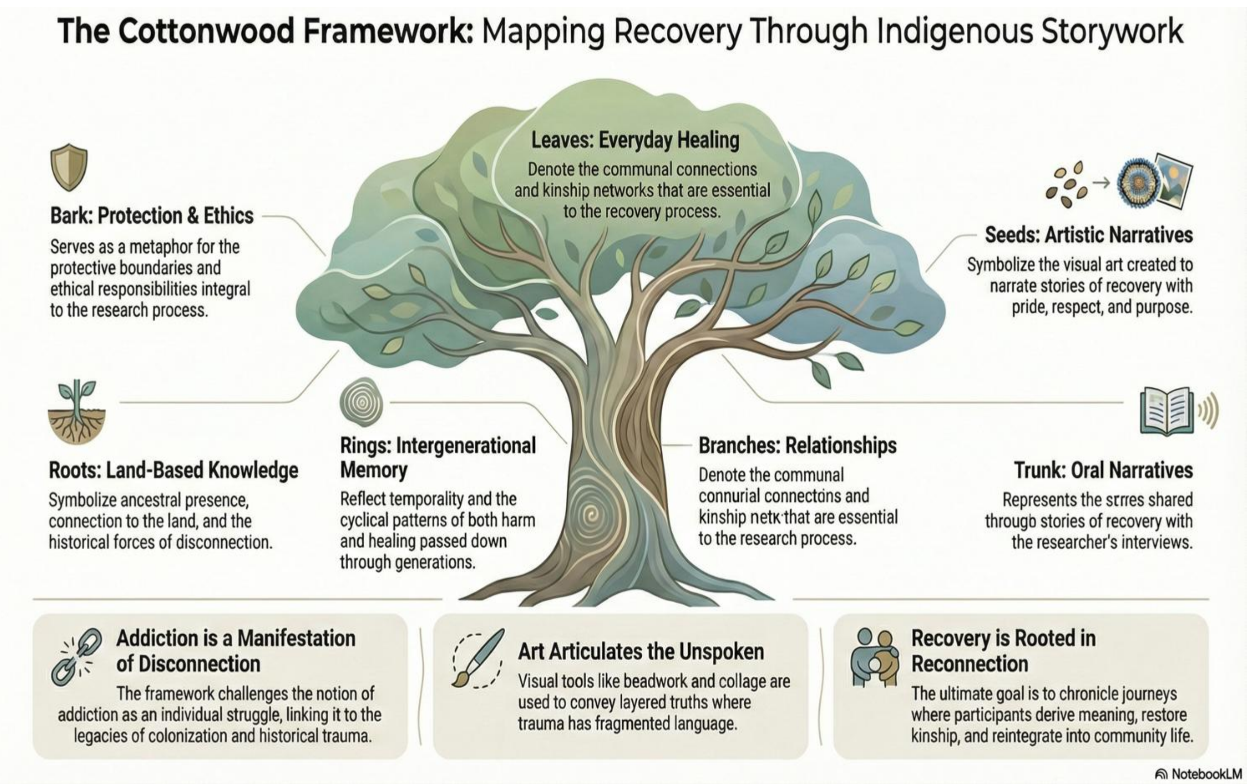
This study employs a qualitative, relational research design grounded in Indigenous Storywork, a framework I developed to honor stories as living knowledge (Archibald, 2008; Archibald et al., 2019). I perceive stories as teachings conveyed through breath, memory, land, and spirit. Relational accountability is at the heart of my inquiry (Kovach, 2019; Wilson, 2008). It shapes how I approach my work, engage with participants, listen, and interpret findings. It also reflects my dedication to returning to the communities and environments that support my research.

The research design situates recovery within a relational context, challenging the notion of addiction as an individual struggle. It posits that addiction is a manifestation of disconnection deeply entrenched in the legacies of colonization, historical trauma, and persistent structural

inequities. At the same time, it acknowledges the values of survivance, cultural continuity, and the potential for reconnection. Through Indigenous Storywork (Archibald, 2008) and visual narrative art, this research chronicles the journeys of individuals in recovery as they derive meaning, restore kinship, and reintegrate into community life (Lonetree, 2012). Figure 9 shows how the Cottonwood tree serves as a framework for mapping the intricate journey of recovery. This approach connects experiences, enhancing understanding of healing through land and nature.

Figure 9

The Cottonwood Framework



Note. Created with NotebookLM Images.

Indigenous Storywork

The following sections explain how Indigenous Storywork informs each stage of the research process. This work is anchored in the principles of respect, responsibility, reciprocity,

reverence, holism, interrelatedness, and synergy, which are treated as ideals and daily practices woven throughout the study (Archibald, 2008). Indigenous Storywork serves as the core of this study, nurturing relationships at every step and informing all choices made. Through this, I approached this research as a sacred endeavor focusing on cultural reclamation, bringing knowledge back to the people, and fostering communal healing.

Indigenous Story: The First Pillar of Truth

Story is a living container, never detached from its relationship to land, kinship, and spirit (Archibald, 2008; Atalay, 2019; Christian et al., 2020; McCall et al., 2009). Storywork elevates my work from an extractive to a narrative approach, calling for accountability and honoring the responsibilities each story carries (Wilson, 2008). Archibald (2008) introduced the concept of Indigenous Storywork as a model that integrates storytelling with theory, pedagogy, and relational practices. Building on this foundation, Archibald et al. (2019) expanded the framework across diverse Indigenous contexts, demonstrating how Storywork functions as a living methodology that adapts to place, community, and purpose while remaining grounded in relational accountability and cultural responsibility. I utilized Indigenous Storywork as both a theoretical framework and a methodological approach (Archibald et al., 2019; Michell, 1999; Smith, 2021). This allowed me to understand knowledge holistically and relationally, emphasizing my responsibilities towards our community and the living environments reflected in our stories (Absolon, 2022; Kovach, 2019). Indigenous Storywork critiques Western research practices that often treat narratives as isolated data, disconnected from their spiritual, contextual, and ethical dimensions (Archibald, 2008; Archibald & Parent, 2019; Kovach, 2019; Smith, 2012). By incorporating Indigenous Storywork as both a theory and a method, I ensured that my theoretical commitments aligned with my methodological choices (Campbell, 2022). This

alignment reflects how I define, pursue, and engage with knowledge. In this framework, stories shaped research questions, guided the interpretive process, and established ethical standards throughout the research (Archibald, 2008).

Indigenous Epistemology: Land as First Teacher

At the core of my work lies an Indigenous epistemology that profoundly acknowledges the land as our foremost and enduring teacher (Kimmerer, 2013; Simpson, 2014, 2025). The land embodies memory, wisdom, and narrative; it is a living entity that breathes alongside us and imparts lessons (Cutice, 2025; LaFrance & Nichols, 2009). In each narrative, the land conveys a message sometimes through silence - acting as a witness, and at other times through words that inspire healing (Absolon, 2022). It was essential to establish a strong sense of location and connection to the land in my storytelling. The region I reference in my narratives, as well as those recounted by the participants, is situated on the Uintah and Ouray Reservation in Utah.

Relational Accountability

I view knowledge as existing within the connections among myself, other participants, our ancestors, and the land. Relational accountability transforms my research into a ceremonial practice of connection, where my primary duty is to uphold the integrity of these relationships (Archibald & Parent, 2019; San Pedro & 21, 2019). I am responsible for ensuring that this knowledge serves the collective healing of the web of relations to which I belong (Kovach, 2019; Wilson, 2008).

Story as life-Force

I consider stories to be the "heartwood" of the Cottonwood tree, the innermost core that imparts strength, resilience, and uprightness to the entire structure (Simpson, 2014; Thistle,

2019). Narratives serve as both an anchor and a compass during the tumultuous periods associated with addiction, reminding us of our responsibilities to ourselves, our communities, and the land we inhabit (Stewart, 2015). Kimmerer (2013) argues that plants are our oldest teachers and that by paying attention, “a form of reciprocity”, we can learn how to live sustainably and in balance (p. 9).

Visual Narrative Theory: Art as Sacred Language

A key component of this study is the use of visual narrative art. I employ beadwork, digital mixed media collage, and photography, all visual methods, to convey layered truths, especially when the impacts of addiction and trauma have left language fragmented. Visual art plays a crucial role in meaning-making, utilizing patterns, materials, and imagery to express concepts that may be difficult to articulate (Racette, 2016). This aligns closely with Indigenous ways of knowing, which emphasize that knowledge is transmitted through the hands and the senses. By connecting storytelling and visual art, this research allows both participants and me to articulate experiences of addiction and recovery without confining our narratives to clinical descriptions.

Integrating the concepts of non-verbal knowing and the symbolic power of the Cottonwood seed, this study treats visual art as a primary theoretical site of inquiry. I envision digital mixed-media and beading as seeds that cultivate profound dialogue. These practices serve as vessels, carrying our spiritual connection to the land, while also holding immense potential for healing that looks toward the future.

Cole (2006) argues that we shouldn't separate old and new technologies. He suggests that whatever tools we use to tell our stories, whether it is a cedar canoe or a digital collage, valid processes must be grounded in the spirit of creation. This study utilizes an Indigenous Research

Paradigm that acknowledges the profound ways in which we come to understand through dream knowledge and body-based awareness (Cajete, 2000; Deloria, 1979, 1999). By centering these ways of knowing, the research validates the spiritual and physical dimensions of recovery that are often excluded from Western clinical discourse. It beautifully captures the ancestral memories and spiritual wisdom that traditional academic language often neglects. In doing so, it invites us to explore and embrace these deeper insights that connect us to our heritage. By using traditional elements like beading to record the stories of our lives today, I bridge the gap between the spirit realm and lived reality, documenting both the pain of addiction and the hope of survival.

Indigenous Worldviews: Spirituality, interconnectedness, Dreams and Memories

My work is deeply rooted in the work of Brave Heart (2003) and Duran (2006), who inspire me to view recovery as an enriching spiritual journey that reconnects us to our rightful place in the circle of life. I believe that validating the "unseen world", where our dreams and memories are honored as sacred, plays a crucial role in this journey (Duran, 2006). In my own stories, I recognize that we carry the narratives of our ancestors within us; these historical blueprints shape who we are today (Talaga, 2024). Brave Heart's (1998) emphasis on historical trauma resonates with me, highlighting how memories, even those passed down through generations, are vital for healing our "soul wounds" (Duran, 2006). Similarly, Duran's (2006) perspective on postcolonial psychology underscores the importance of acknowledging spiritual phenomena that often clash with Western notions of healing. As I navigate my own recovery and artistic expression, I find that the spirit indeed offers its own profound guidance. This process helps me forge a deeper connection to my ancestors, my community, and my own identity,

allowing me to embody the stories that have shaped my journey and those of those who have come before me.

Decolonial Recovery: Beyond the Deficit Model

In this research, I consciously shift away from the prevailing Western clinical frameworks that often interpret Indigenous existence solely through narratives of scarcity or deficit (Tuck, 2009). My research approach is deeply informed by the healing stories of my family. I posit that the "soul wounds", resulting from historical trauma, necessitate remedies rooted in spiritual and narrative healing, an aspect frequently overlooked by conventional behavioral models (Duran, 2006). I conceptualize recovery as an act of cultural reclamation, an intentional journey of rediscovering and reintegrating knowledge essential to the collective healing of our communities (Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998; Brown, 2021; Duran et al., 2008; Gone, 2011). At the core of my research is Indigenous Storywork, which provides a framework for understanding how we heal and share our narratives. This approach serves as a resilient means of reclaiming our stories from Western perspectives that have historically shaped representations of Indigenous peoples (Archibald et al., 2019; Evans-Campbell, 2008; Tachine & Nicolazzo, 2019).

Data Sources and Relational Materials

In this study, data are conceptualized as composed of connections, memories, and meanings, rather than as isolated evidence to be extracted (Quinless, 2022; TeHennepe, 1997; Walter & Anderson, 2013). Data sources originate in interpersonal relationships and in the distinct forms those relationships take (Chilisa, 2012; Tuck & Yang, 2014). I approached each source as a narrative, treating it with care and a deep sense of responsibility. With intention

behind every choice, I ensure the data truly reflect participants' voices, intertwining their experiences with embodied artistic inquiry and thoughtful documentation.

1. Participant Interviews: Story as Pedagogy

Semi-structured participant interviews serve as the primary source of narrative data. These dialogic exchanges elicit personal accounts of addiction, recovery, loss, and reintegration. The interview protocol (Appendix C) was crafted to foster a deep exploration of these themes while ensuring that participant agency is strictly protected. Each participant had the autonomy to determine what information to share, which memories to highlight, and which insights to document.

- Treatment of Data: I approached interview transcripts as narratives, avoiding treating them as mere pieces of information. It was important for me to recognize that these discussions often revolved around trauma; this understanding shaped the way I engaged with data.
- Analytic Focus: The analytic focus adopted a relational listening posture, grounded in an Indigenous-centric ethic of witnessing rather than mere observation. This approach necessitated a sensitivity to the infra-narrative, the layers of meaning residing beneath the spoken word.
- Methodological Alignment: This approach aligns with Indigenous Storywork (Archibald, 2008), recognizing story as pedagogy. Within this framework, a story teaches through its pacing, its relational context, and the ethical obligations it places upon the listener.

2. Personal Narrative and Lived Experience

The stories I carry from my own life, intertwined with the rich and meaningful narratives from my family, have become an essential and irreplaceable part of my dissertation journey. Each story holds a piece of who I am and reflects the experiences that shape my understanding of the world around me. In my work, I've discovered that these personal accounts resonate deeply within my community, connecting us through shared struggles and triumphs. My research sits at the crossroads of my role as a professional, my responsibilities to my family and community, and my own path through the challenging terrains of addiction and recovery.

This intersection forms the foundation of my methodology, where storytelling and personal narratives take center stage. This study is about human experience and the powerful role that stories play in healing and understanding. By incorporating these narratives into my research, I was able to shed light on the complexities we face together and foster empathy within our community.

- Through these lenses, I was able to provide a deeper understanding of the multifaceted nature of addiction, reflecting the realities faced by individuals and families alike. The convergence of personal observation, familial insights, and professional engagement enables me to approach this topic with a level of depth and authenticity that is both academically rigorous and deeply humane. It is my hope that this work will both contribute to academic discourse and resonate with those whose lives have been touched by addiction.
- The purpose of these narratives is to contextualize my research. They clarify my positionality, inform the direction of my inquiry, and shape my interpretive approach.

- I documented sources using a combination of structured reflexive writing, memory-based entries, and analytic memos. This approach allowed me to capture insights and reflections while ensuring that all relevant information was organized and easily accessible.
- I approached this material with a strong sense of responsibility, ensuring it clarifies the relational context and enhances interpretive transparency. My intention is never to overshadow participants' voices; instead, I aim to honor the accountability that is central to Indigenous research paradigms (Wilson, 2008).

3. Visual Narrative Art as Data

My artwork unfolds as visual narratives, each piece intricately combining beadwork, vibrant digital mixed-media collages, and evocative photography. These creations serve not only as vessels of knowledge but also as important data sources that capture and record the experiences and issues affecting our Indigenous communities and us today.

Through my work, I explore a complex form of storytelling that delves into intergenerational memories. Each piece encapsulates the silenced narratives of our cultures, embodying the profound wisdom handed down through generations. This engagement with art reflects the themes of survivance and resistance, resonating deeply within our communities as we navigate contemporary challenges (Napoleon & Friedland, 2014; Vizenor, 2008).

My art invites readers to engage with the richness of our histories while serving as a visual record of our experiences. It highlights the strength and resilience that shape our identities while documenting the issues we face. It is a vital dialogue with our past and present, honoring those who have come before us and acknowledging the struggles that continue to affect us. Visual art enters the study through two distinct modalities:

1. A Record of Meaning-Making: Art operates as a generative process in which I respond to participants' stories through material practice.
2. An Analytic Medium: Art functions as a method of inquiry, revealing patterns, themes, and tensions that linear language tends to flatten.

4. Researcher Reflexive Materials

In my research, the use of reflexive materials is crucial for maintaining both analytical rigor and ethical accountability. These materials include my field notes, deep listening reflections, and analytic memos that I create following interviews and throughout the art-making process. These documents are important as they safeguard the integrity of my research and meticulously track my decision-making processes. They help me identify emerging themes and highlight significant ethical considerations. Importantly and they allow me to document instances of resonance and discomfort, which are essential for recognizing possible distortions in interpretation influenced by colonial logics. By clearly articulating my analytic processes, these materials promote transparency and strengthen my accountability to both participants and the wider community.

5. Study Documents and Research Items

As I navigated the administrative aspects of my research, I focused on several key documents, including invitation letters (Appendix A), consent forms (Appendix B), interview protocols (Appendix C), agreements on transcription confidentiality (Appendix D), and permissions for visual materials (Appendix E). While these documents are often viewed as purely narrative data, I see them as vital components that reinforce ethical practices and help maintain clear relational boundaries throughout the process. These documents reflect my commitment to prioritizing participant autonomy, privacy, and cultural integrity. This is

especially crucial when dealing with sensitive topics like trauma or other emotional triggers (Appendix F). They serve as tangible evidence of how I approached my research with respect and mindfulness, ensuring that the participants felt safe and valued at every step of the journey.

Summary: Analytic Framing of the Data Set

The combination of these sources generates a multidimensional dataset in which narratives are seamlessly articulated through spoken accounts, written reflections, and visual representations. This approach facilitates triangulation based on Indigenous principles of coherence and resonance, rather than reliance on statistical validation (Kovach, 2019; Wilson, 2008).

I approached this dataset looking for:

- Convergence: Where the language of disconnection in an interview appears again in visual patterns of fragmentation.
- Productive Difference: Where art reveals meanings that interviews do not name directly.
- Generative Silence: Where silence functions as a form of knowledge to be respected, rather than a gap to be filled.

Following Robinson (2020) and Smith (2012), this study rejects the extractive 'reduction' of stories into fragmented codes. Instead, the research employs a multimodal approach that honors Campbell’s (2007) call for narrative integrity. By keeping the stories layered within the context of the beading circle, the research facilitates a sovereign listening process that respects the 'medicine' of the story and its relational power.

Data Analysis: The Process of "Storyweaving"

In analyzing these data, I used a technique called "storyweaving" (see Figure 10) Storyweaving respects the cultural nuances inherent in a story (Couchie & Miguel, 2018). It allows me to delve into the 'infra-narrative', the important meanings found within the silences and the spaces between words (p. 318). This process preserves each individual's narrative integrity.

Figure 10

The Six Cycles of Storyweaving

Note. Created with NotebookLM Images.

In the first cycle of my research, which I call grounding and listening, I dove deep into the data. I reviewed each recorded narrative several times, focusing on not just the words spoken but also the tone, the pauses, and the emotional layers beneath them. I made it a point to read the transcripts out loud, paying attention to both the verbal cues and the nonverbal signals. Much of

my insights came from considering what was left unsaid and noticing how my own body reacted to the stories being shared. I keep detailed reflective notes throughout this process. These notes were essential for my reflexive practice and helped me anchor my analysis in lived experiences. Next, I synthesized these accounts to extract common lessons. This approach unfolded through several distinct cycles, each enriching my holistic understanding of the narratives.

In the second cycle of holistic reading, I dove deep into each story, fully engaging with the narrative as a whole. This phase was all about zooming in on the core events and key turning points that shaped the narratives. I paid particular attention to relational anchors, such as kinship ties, the significance of land, and ceremonial practices, that are crucial for understanding the broader sociocultural contexts surrounding substance use. By framing the stories within these richly layered contexts, I aimed to uncover the intricacies that influenced the experiences shared. This comprehensive approach not only enhanced my understanding of each individual narrative but also shed light on the collective experiences that emerged, ultimately enriching my research and its implications. This process fueled my curiosity and moved my work forward

In the third cycle, focused on coding, I systematically analyzed the narratives for recurring themes and significant story elements. This included aspects such as first use, loss, violence, experiences in foster care, educational trajectories, incarceration, grief, love, protection, and pivotal moments of return. Additionally, I looked for teachings that illuminated what supports recovery, including cultural connections, the role of Elders, prayer practices, community responsibilities, and land-based practices. This coding process was essential for structuring the data and revealing connections between various narrative elements.

The fourth cycle, thematic constellations, involved synthesizing codes into thematic groupings that reflect Indigenous relational logics, rather than imposing clinical or deficit-based

frameworks. This approach ensured that the themes resonate with participants' language and experiences, honoring their voices. In this stage, I also composed analytic memos that linked the emerging themes back to the foundational principles of Indigenous Storywork, emphasizing responsibilities and reciprocity within the narratives.

During the fifth cycle, visual narrative analysis, I adopted an artist-researcher lens to examine artworks related to the narratives. This involved a detailed exploration of symbols, composition, color relationships, material choices, and the presence of fragmentation or reassembly within the visual representations. I engaged in a comparative analysis of visual themes and interview findings, allowing each to inform and enrich the other. This interconnected analysis fostered a more nuanced understanding of the narratives and their artistic embodiments.

Finally, in the sixth cycle, return and verification, I prioritized participant feedback and representational integrity. When participants requested a review of the findings, I shared excerpts or summaries for their input, ensuring that their voices remained protected and their intentions upheld. Additionally, I sought guidance from mentors and cultural knowledge holders to navigate questions of protocol and representation, reinforcing the ethical dimensions of my analysis.

Through this iterative and reflexive process, I aimed to uncover and articulate the complexities and teachings embedded in the stories, honoring participants' lived experiences while contributing to a broader understanding of the socio-cultural landscapes that shape their narratives.

Positionality and Reflexivity: Connecting the Roots

My positionality is a fundamental influence on every dimension of this research. I recognize the significance of my shared community ties with participants and the power inherent

in my professional roles. This duality creates a complex tension that I navigate with humility and clarity. At the outset of each interaction, I made it a priority to articulate my roles explicitly to establish transparency and foster trust. Recognizing the potential power dynamics at play, I maintained a clear distinction between my counseling responsibilities and my role as a researcher. I was acutely aware that participants might feel obligated or anxious about their participation. To mitigate these feelings, I emphasized the principles of choice and confidentiality, and the right to refuse participation without any repercussions.

Reflexivity is a recurring theme throughout this study, enabling a deeper understanding of my influence on the research process. I diligently maintained a research journal that served multiple purposes: record critical decisions, emotional responses, and reflective insights about the land, and ethical dilemmas that arose during the study. This journal served as a vital tool for documenting my accountability to both the participants and the knowledge they entrusted to me. It provided a space for reflection, allowing me to examine how my own experiences, biases, and positionality shaped the research outcomes.

Moreover, engaging in reflexivity is more than an academic exercise; it is a necessary practice that enhances the integrity of research. By consistently reflecting on my positionality, I aimed to ensure that my interpretations and conclusions remained rooted in participants' lived experiences rather than being unduly influenced by my own perspectives. This commitment to reflexivity reinforced my responsibility to uphold research ethics, ensuring that participants felt respected, valued, and heard throughout the process. In doing so, I worked to create a collaborative environment where knowledge is co-constructed, and participants' voices are central to the inquiry.

Ethical Considerations: Sacred Responsibility

This study delved into sensitive experiences, including trauma, loss, and substance use, necessitating a rigorous ethical framework. Before data were collected, each participant received and signed an informed consent form. I articulated the study's aims, potential risks and benefits, and participants' rights, in a clear, accessible manner. I also emphasized the importance of regularly revisiting consent, empowering participants to withdraw or modify their contributions at any stage of the study.

Participants had the autonomy to decide whether their names were included in this dissertation. In cases where anonymity was preferred, I utilized pseudonyms and carefully removed identifying information to minimize risk. This is particularly crucial within small communities, where even indirect identifiers can amplify the risk of identification and increase vulnerability.

I approached storytelling with sensitivity, inviting participants to share their narratives without pressuring them to disclose more than they were comfortable with. It was essential to remain vigilant for signs of distress, so I could pause the conversation when necessary. If participants expressed a need for additional support, I provided information on local resources and crisis options, ensuring that interview pacing was intentionally designed to prevent participants from feeling overwhelmed.

Adhering to community-specific guidelines was vital to ensure we were discussing appropriate topics, using respectful language, and managing sacred knowledge. I am committed to not reproducing teachings shared as private, ceremonial, or restricted, and I actively seek guidance from community elders or representatives when in doubt.

I required consent for use of photographs or images that depict identifiable individuals or locations. Care was taken to avoid including images that might compromise privacy. I honor participants' ownership of their creative works and respect their rights to control how their images are presented. I strongly oppose stigma-laden portrayals and sensationalism that often accompany narratives from marginalized communities. I am focused on representing stories of survivance, kinship repair, and the ongoing journey toward well-being (Absolon, 2022; Campbell, 2007; Castellano. 2000). I resist any attempts to reduce Indigenous peoples to mere representations of trauma, instead highlighting their resilience, agency, and rich cultural narratives. These ethical considerations underscore my commitment not only to the integrity of this research but also to the well-being and dignity of the participants involved. This framework fosters a respectful and nurturing environment conducive to meaningful dialogue and exploration.

Conclusion: The Seeding

My research explored the mechanisms through which storytelling engenders resilience and fosters cultural revitalization (Hare, 2012). By illuminating the pathways to healing rooted in our traditional narratives, I highlight the importance of community-centered approaches to promoting well-being and cultural sustainability. Through this lens, I seek to provide a richer understanding of healing practices that honor Indigenous ways of knowing and being.

This chapter articulates the research methodology used in this study, a methodology firmly rooted in Indigenous Storywork, relational accountability, and the principles of visual narrative art. My approach to gathering stories encompasses a range of methods, including interviews, reflective writing grounded in lived experience, land-based reflections, and artistic practice. The analysis is conducted through the process of storyweaving, where each narrative is

regarded as a form of living knowledge (Couchie & Miguel, 2018). I prioritize returning the findings to participants with a deep sense of care and respect. Ethical considerations are fundamentally intertwined with the methodological framework I employ. I emphasize responsibility, reciprocity, and reverence as foundational values that underpin the integrity of this work (Kovach, 2019; Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2008).

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

"Hunger"

Rain taps against the window as I sit alone in the dim light, each drop calling forth memories from my childhood. There is a peculiar magic in the rhythm of rain, how it awakens ghosts of the past and stirs up stories half-remembered. One such story, whispered to us as children, was more than a tale; it was a warning, a shadow meant to both frighten and protect.

We called her the See-aahch, a figure who haunted the shadows at the edges of our small world. She was a warning woven into every nightfall, a presence meant to keep us close to home when darkness crept in. The rules were clear: wander too far or ignore the voices calling you home, and the See-aahch would find you. It was said she spirited children away and fed them to her ravenous brood.

As children, we clung to that story, letting it seep into our bones, fueling both our play and our fears. I remember the gnawing urgency it created, the need to hurry home before the last sliver of sun vanished. It was a tale that shaped our evenings, making us hesitate at the threshold when dusk beckoned with its familiar, dangerous allure.

Now, as an adult working in addiction and recovery, the See-aach's legend takes on a new and haunting significance. It's strange how stories evolve with us, their meanings shifting as we cross the thresholds of our lives. I often reflect on how these tales, meant to terrify, were also attempts to protect and pass down lessons wrapped in shadows.

In this context, I see how these stories can reveal deeper truths about our behavior and choices. They remind us of the importance of staying safe, not just physically but also mentally and emotionally. The stories we hear, whether as children or adults, can have lasting impacts,

guiding us through the complexities of life and reminding us of the lessons we need to learn along the way.

The See-aahch herself was a nightmare made flesh, a woman twisted into a specter by bitterness and loss. Her face was always hidden, long, matted hair falling like a curtain over her features. Some whispered that beneath that tangled veil, only agony remained. Her clothes hung in tatters from a frame already ravaged, shoulders and lips gnawed away, evidence of a hunger so deep it turned her upon herself. And always, that dreadful, wide grin: teeth made for tearing, always seeking the next taste of flesh.

The See-aahch's story surfaced only in the dead of winter, when the world slumbered beneath a heavy shroud of snow and the air bit with a silent, relentless cold. It was on those nights, when darkness swallowed the roads, and the silence pressed close, that the secrets of the See-Hatch seemed to awaken, threading through the hush like a warning only the desperate could hear. The world itself felt complicit, using snow and shadow to cloak her terrible truth.

Twilight was her domain. She prowled the backroads, gliding behind houses, her shape barely more than a ripple among the skeletal branches. Her voice would slide through the air, a melody at once beautiful and dreadful, a siren's call meant to lure the lonely and the defiant. Those who ignored the warnings felt its pull, drawn out into the dark on promises that quickly soured into terror. What seemed like fulfillment was only the beginning of despair.

For those who strayed too near, a strange hunger took root, a craving that twisted inside, hollowing them out. It started quietly, stealing away the warmth of a meal, the safety of home. But it grew, always hungry, soon turning neighbors into suspects, then targets. What began as a small pleasure became something darker, a spiral ever downward.

When nothing was left to take, the hunger turned them inward, driving them to the final horror of devouring themselves. Darkness wrapped around their hearts, suffocating what was left of hope or memory. They became echoes, shadows of the people they had been, each one a silent scream woven into the See-aahch's roots of misery.

Even now, in the stillness beneath the moon, I imagine her wandering, her song drifting through the darkness. This journey is more than a story; it's a warning, a reminder of the lessons carved deep by fear and longing. Her melody is woven from regret and lost connections, begging us to face the shadows within ourselves and the memories we try to bury.

The See-Hatch's story, I realize, is not so different from the slow, creeping advance of addiction. It slips in quietly, dressed as relief or comfort, a gentle invitation that soon reveals its insatiable appetite. What starts as a whisper becomes a consuming hunger, spreading outward, taking hold of family, friends, and the entire world around the afflicted.

That hunger never truly disappears. It resurfaces, leaving hollowness and restless yearning. In those moments, the See-aahch is more than a story; she is a metaphor for the relentless, wordless ache that addiction brings. Silence and isolation give it strength. Every craving, every relapse, is another verse in the endless song of hunger she sings.

But even in the darkest tales, there is a glimmer: the hope that by reaching out, by breaking the silence, we can unravel the hunger's hold. In telling these stories, we learn to mend what's broken and find our way back to the warmth of connection.

Introduction

Indigenous Storywork is a powerful methodology that places storytelling at the heart of learning, research, and healing. It recognizes that stories are more than narratives—they are living teachings that transmit knowledge through the lived experiences of individuals and

communities. Storywork emphasizes the importance of learning from life experiences, inviting us to listen deeply and connect with others' stories so we can resonate with their journeys and draw lessons (Absolon, 2022; Archibald, 2008; Battise, 2002; Cajete, 2000; Smith, 2012). By centering Indigenous stories, we move beyond abstract theories to embrace ways of knowing rooted in kinship, ceremony, and the ongoing flow of cultural traditions (Baldy, 2018; Hart, 2009; Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008). In this way, Indigenous Storywork becomes both a research methodology and a way of life, one that honors responsibility, reciprocity, and care, and fosters collective learning, healing, and reconnection during times of challenge (Brave Heart, 2003; Duran, 2006; Gone, 2013; San Pedro, 2021; Walters et al., 2010).

In this chapter, we explore four powerful life experience narratives that demonstrate the essence of Indigenous Storywork. Each story offers real-life insight into trauma, addiction, and, most importantly, resilience and survival. By engaging with these stories, we see how Storywork enables us to learn directly from lived experiences and to recognize our own connections to others' journeys. These narratives serve as lessons and methodologies in themselves, showing how storytelling can guide research, shape educational practice, and foster community well-being. Through these life experience stories, we discover the transformative potential of telling and listening to stories as a means for learning, healing, and building relationships.

Growing up, the stories exchanged in our homes were more than entertainment—they were fundamental to our learning and growth. As Archibald (2008) emphasizes, storytelling is an Indigenous pedagogy that allows us to make sense of society and our place within it, often through informal, everyday interactions (p. 74). These narratives, shared around the kitchen table or in the quiet of evening, sparked our imaginations, shaped our behaviors, and instilled essential values (Archibald, 2008). Storytelling taught us about cultural norms, expectations, and ways of

being in the world, highlighting the enduring power of oral traditions for teaching and learning (Archibald, 2008; Battise, 2002; Blaeser, 2012; Deloria, 1979; Pihama, 2015). Importantly, stories about addiction and recovery offered us real-life lessons guiding our conduct, deepening our connections to spirituality and nature, and reminding us that by telling and hearing each other's stories, we cultivate empathy, support, and resilience. Through Indigenous Storywork, we are reminded that every story is both a lesson and a methodology, helping us learn from life experience and resonate with the experiences of others.

As I begin this chapter, I embrace it with grace and humility, feeling deeply grateful for the opportunity to conduct these interviews and for the trust the participants placed in me as they shared their stories. Chapter 4 serves as the centerpiece of this dissertation, providing a safe place for the storytellers' voices, where their narratives unfold as living teachings cultivated through relationships, time, and attentive listening. I approached each interview with the ethical commitments of Indigenous Storywork, understanding it as both a method and a theoretical framework (Archibald, 2008). In this sacred space, we honor the stories shared and acknowledge the deep connections woven through each experience.

The data for this study emerged from insightful interviews with participants whose narratives significantly contribute to my findings. In October 2025, I shared an invitation (see Figure 11) on social media for individuals to participate in my dissertation research project, which explores how stories, art, and memories connected to the land can deepen our understanding of alcohol and substance use disorders as forms of disconnection. In the invitation, I explained that this research aims to investigate the healing potential of reconnecting with cultural and community ties. Participation in this study was entirely voluntary. I received more than 20 responses and, after obtaining the necessary IRB consent forms (see Appendix B),

officially welcomed four participants, all Indigenous females. One female participant requested anonymity and preferred a pseudonym, while maintaining confidentiality regarding her location, which is her right.

Figure 11

Seeking Research Participants- Share Your Stories Fliers

I view these findings as manifestations of living knowledge arising from relationships built through intentional listening. There is a profound responsibility to honor others' voices and avoid hasty categorization of their experiences. My approach to the interviews was framed within a research context that sought to understand how recovery becomes attainable when elements such as storytelling, land, spirit, and kinship are prioritized in Indigenous Storywork. This focus significantly influenced both my methodological framework and analytical lens, shaping how I engaged with participants and articulated the insights that arose from our conversations.

Additionally, it encouraged me to situate myself openly within the research narrative, recognizing that my presence as a researcher significantly influences the storytelling space. Therefore, I integrated my clinical training and sense of community accountability into this context, being fully aware of the historical weight carried by families and communities affected by substance use and scholarly inquiry. In this chapter, I treat the interviews as pedagogical opportunities, interpreted through an Indigenous lens. This perspective deepens the analysis while respecting the rich, contextual fabric of participants' lived experiences.

These findings emerged through the Seven Principles of Storywork (Archibald, 2008):

- **Respect:** I attuned my listening to grasp the underlying meaning without forcing any explanations. I viewed pauses, laughter, and emotions as integral components of the knowledge being shared.
- **Responsibility:** I focused on how I conveyed each story with care, emphasizing my responsibility to safeguard shared trust and honor the intentions behind each offering.

- **Reverence:** It fundamentally influenced how I engaged with spirit, ceremony, and the land, viewing them as active relatives and teachers, as well as important contexts in my life.
- **Reciprocity:** This chapter is shared as a meaningful return, where every story is presented as a heartfelt gift to our community, offered with deep gratitude and utmost respect.
- **Holism, Inter-relatedness, and Synergy:** This creates an opportunity for a synthesis where recovery is viewed as a collective journey. It emphasizes the importance of rebalancing our connections to the land, nurturing our spirits, and taking responsibility for our relationships with one another.

As I commenced these interviews, I engaged in the process with a commitment to active listening, guided by my research questions. By the end of each dialogue, I found myself deeply attuned to the diverse voices that resonated within me. My personal journey was furthered by the rigorous discipline of listening, which enabled me to grasp nuances often overlooked in conventional discourse. Throughout this process, I cultivated an awareness of silences, those poignant intervals that harbor grief, as well as the laughter that occasionally lightens the weight of stark realities. I became sensitive to instances when a speaker's voice faltered, revealing how our bodies are repositories of memories that resurface in conversation.

Findings

In this section, I present the first participant, whose narrative effectively illustrates the intricate interplay between joy and sorrow. This story serves as a poignant reminder that personal narratives are invaluable data, shedding light on the complexities of the human experience. This account exemplifies the profound insights that arise from the intersection of vulnerability and

resilience, underscoring the significance of storytelling as a means of conveying emotional truths and lived experiences (Archibald, 2028).

LaDean's Story

LaDean's story unfolds through the lens of her cultural heritage and a transformative recovery journey. In conversation, she described her maternal roots in the Skokomish tribe and her paternal lineage in the Ute community of Fort Duchesne, Utah. At 61, LaDean reflected on 15 and a half years of sustained sobriety, the longest in her life, demonstrating deep commitment to healing and drawing strength from her heritage. Her experience illustrates how cultural identity and personal resilience shape a meaningful path to recovery.

Her interview reveals a life shaped by early exposure to alcohol, family love and loss, and the challenges of drinking and grief. Despite these hardships, LaDean found her way back to spirit, language, and community, framing recovery as something achieved through perseverance and honesty. LaDean's reflections highlight how alcohol can become woven into family life, appearing routine while causing deep harm. Her journey, marked by memory, loss, and personal responsibility, reveals the importance of speaking one's truth and building intentional connections with self, family, and community. Her story offers valuable insights into transformative recovery, echoing research on the power of narrative and self-reflection (Evans et al., 2014; White & Kelly, 2011).

In recounting her early childhood, LaDean highlighted the coexistence of affection and adversity within her family. She described her father as a loving presence, "good to us" and "loving," despite frequent separations and complex familial arrangements. However, this warmth was juxtaposed with severe domestic violence and chronic alcohol abuse. LaDean vividly recalled, "My parents fought a lot. I mean, my mother was a victim of domestic violence, and my

dad drank a lot". Reconciliations ultimately followed her mother's repeated attempts to leave. Notably, her parents remarried each other three times. These observations underscore the intricate interplay between care and harm in families affected by substance use and alcohol, a pattern well documented in Indigenous family systems and the disruption of kinship (Methot, 2019; Venner et al., 2021).

These early experiences are significant as they illustrate how exposure to alcohol and violence can profoundly influence a child's internalized understanding of home and safety. Witnessing cycles of conflict, separation, reconciliation, and repeated trauma conditions a child's nervous system to anticipate instability (Mash & Wolfe, 2015; Methot, 2019). Within this context, alcohol becomes a part of daily life, shaping our manifestation of conflict by slowing the strategies by which silence and pain are managed. In my experience, alcohol was woven into the daily rhythms of our household, framing how conflict showed up and how we learned to hold our pain quietly. As I reflect on my personal journey and the stories shared in my dissertation, I see how repeated exposure to drinking made its presence feel ordinary, an accepted part of life rather than an exception. This does not mean the harm went away; instead, it became something I learned to live with, to expect, and even to normalize.

My research, grounded in both personal memory and scholarly work, echoes what studies like those of Anda et al. (2006) have found - children who grow up this way often carry these coping patterns and risks into adulthood. Anda et al. discuss how early trauma impacts the brain. They also argue that a child's brain development is determined by genetics and shaped by the safety or chaos of their early environment (p. 175).

LaDean's origin narrative encompasses migration, affection, and the significance of place. She recounts her father's enlistment in the military under pretenses, his posting in

Tacoma, Washington, and meeting her mother at the bus stop, a moment LaDean conveyed with noticeable tenderness. This account exemplifies the coexistence of happiness with family histories. In line with Storywork methodology, it is essential to honor the complexity of her life, rather than reducing it to a single narrative. Research on Indigenous storytelling emphasizes the pedagogical power of holding multiple, sometimes contradictory, truths within a single account (Archibald, 2008; Smith, 2012).

Adolescence, Peer Pressure, and the First Normalization of Drinking

LaDean traced her initial encounters with alcohol to age 14, contextualizing these experiences within a dynamic of peer influence and accessibility. She recalled instances of "stealing bottles from Safeway" – "we had on big, long trench coats" - and navigating the fine line between active participation and complicity as her friends stole alcohol while she remained in close proximity. When questioned about her motivation, she responded: "Everybody else was doing it". The recurrence of this theme in her narrative underscores the enduring influence of peer pressure and concerns regarding social exclusion. These findings align the work of Spillane et al. (2023) which shows that peer dynamics are a critical factor in the early normalization of substance use among adolescents.

LaDean's experience underscores the social dimension of normalization, rooted in the fundamental human need for belonging and in the implicit association between drinking and social connection (Smye et al., 2023). Her narrative also highlights the developmental trajectory of normalization - early exposure to adult patterns of drinking and familial conflict establishes a foundation upon which adolescent peer culture further entrenches alcohol use (Duran et al., 2008; Linklater, 2014). Once alcohol is established as a medium of social cohesion at a formative age, it becomes increasingly likely to be adopted as a coping mechanism in adulthood,

especially when subsequent relationships unfold earlier traumas (Evans-Campbell, 2008; Gutiérrez, 2024; Linklater, 2014).

Young Marriage and the Repetition of Harm

During the interview, LaDean recounted her experiences of alcohol use beginning in high school and her subsequent early marriage and an abusive partnership. She emphasized the continuity of trauma across her life, noting how domestic violence in childhood set the stage for later relational patterns involving abuse and alcoholism. This intergenerational transmission of trauma and substance use is a phenomenon widely documented in Indigenous communities, where unresolved trauma and normalized substance use significantly impact partner selection, perceptions of safety, and identity formation (Marsh et al., 2015; Pride et al., 2021). LaDean's narrative thus serves as a pivotal case, illustrating how cycles of harm perpetuate across generations until disrupted by intentional acts of truth-telling and relational accountability. Research by Brave Heart (2003) and Evans-Campbell (2008) highlights the significance of breaking intergenerational cycles through culturally anchored interventions.

Treatment, Performance, and No Quitting

A salient theme that emerged during LaDean's interview was the distinction between participation in treatment programs and genuine internal readiness for change. LaDean's account reveals the disconnection between outward participation in sobriety and the internal emotional landscape, a phenomenon substantiated by qualitative studies on recovery that emphasize the importance of narrative and meaning in additional healing (Chavarria, 2017; Rowan, 2014). She described multiple cycles of inpatient and outpatient treatment, candidly admitting to performing the expected behaviors and providing the response she knew clinicians wanted to hear (e.g., "I was in inpatient, outpatient, inpatient, and again outpatient, and I lied, and told them

what they wanted to hear”). LaDean recounted signing verification sheets for attending AA in bars, highlighting the superficiality of her engagement. She further noted that even powerful external motivators, such as her children’s well-being, were not enough to catalyze authentic change: “My kids could not stop me”.

Observations and experiences indicate a significant difference when individuals act out of genuine readiness compared to compliance. This distinction is repeatedly evidenced in professional settings and is supported by addiction research emphasizing the critical role of intrinsic motivation and self-determination in achieving lasting recovery (Tempier et al., 2011). This insight directly addresses the limitations of intervention models that prioritize compliance over deeper engagement with connection to land, spirituality, and meaning-making (Duran, 2006; Linklater, 2014; Methot, 2019). LaDean’s experiences demonstrate how individuals can skillfully navigate institutional expectations while simultaneously concealing ongoing struggles, shame, and emotional distress. Employing Storywork as a methodological framework, I facilitate the exploration of these complex dynamics in a manner that avoids judgment, thereby positioning the narrative as a primary source of evidence (Donovan & Marlatt, 2004).

Loss, Overdose, and Deepens Alcohol Use

LaDean’s narrative is characterized by significant experiences of grief and loss. She described her daughter’s ongoing struggle with addiction and her eventual death from an overdose, as well as her own efforts to support her daughter’s entry into treatment while continuing to face her own challenges with substance use. Following her daughter’s passing, LaDean took on the responsibility of caring for her infant grandchild, hoping this new role might bring about positive change. The accumulation of these events, including the later deaths of her father in 2021 and several close friends in quick succession, further intensified her emotional

distress. These multiple losses underscore the intricate relationship between grief, caregiving, and substance use, a connection that is well supported in existing bereavement and addiction literature (Even-Campbell, 2008; Kirmayer et al., 2011).

LaDean's story illustrates how unresolved grief and the lack of culturally or emotionally safe spaces can intensify substance use. I am struck by how she describes her drinking as a response to overwhelming pain, a way to numb or escape realities that felt impossible to bear. This part of her narrative also signals a turn toward spiritual healing, something I have witnessed in my own work. Research findings indicate that unaddressed grief constitutes a significant risk factor for increased substance use. Furthermore, healing from such grief often necessitates a focus on both emotional and spiritual needs (Marsh et al., 2016; Whitesell & Kaufman, 2017).

Soul, Imbalance, and an Indigenous Interpretation of Hangover

A pivotal moment in LaDean's recovery occurred when she encountered the teaching: "You know why we feel hungover? It is because your soul leaves you, and you do not feel right" This insight encouraged her to shift her understanding of alcohol's effects from simply behavioral symptoms to a more profound sense of spiritual disconnection. She explained that this teaching resonated with her personal experiences of hangover, which she began to view not just as physical discomfort but as evidence of spiritual absence. This interpretation aligns with Indigenous frameworks of wellness that stress the holistic interconnection of mind, body, and spirit (Duran, 2006; Gone, 2013; Hampton, 1995).

This teaching resonates deeply with my own framing of addiction as a form of disconnection, one that reaches beyond physical symptoms to include separation, imbalance, and spiritual absence. LaDean's story illustrates how even brief, relational teachings can spark meaningful self-reflection and healing, offering language for experiences that might otherwise go

unspoken. In my work, I have seen how these moments of knowledge transmission, rooted in Indigenous epistemology, gain significance through relational dialogue and are validated by lived experience (Hartmann & Gone, 2012).

Rock Bottom, the Grandchild, and Responsibility

LaDean described a profound turning point in her recovery journey, rooted in a deeply personal and relational experience with her granddaughter. She reflected, “Everybody has a rock bottom. That was my rock bottom,” referencing a moment when her granddaughter expressed discomfort with her smell. This honest observation illuminated the very real and immediate effects of substance use on family dynamics. This seemingly simple comment carried significant emotional weight, confronting LaDean with the ways her addiction had shaped her granddaughter’s perceptions and their relationship. The situation escalated further when LaDean awoke to find choke marks on her neck, a disturbing reminder of the dangers inherent in her environment. What made this incident especially impactful was her realization that her granddaughter had witnessed the aftermath, making the intergenerational harm both visible and undeniable. Research and practice demonstrate that moments of relational clarity can serve as powerful catalysts for change, compelling individuals to confront the realities of addiction in ways that abstract knowledge or external pressure cannot (Rowan et at., 2014). These encounters not only highlight the profound impact of substance use within family systems but also facilitate accountability, healing, and the restoration of trust and responsibility. Findings from Gutiérrez (2024), Jardine et al. (2021), and Kirmayer & Valaskakis (2009) underscore the critical role these moments play in fostering positive transformation in the context of addiction.

Prayer, Culture, Language, and Returning

LaDean's recovery journey is deeply informed by her spiritual and cultural practices, which became particularly significant during her daughter's illness and eventual passing. In her reflections, she described prayer as a grounding force, an anchor that provided stability amid profound loss and uncertainty. She also acknowledged that her cultural heritage had always been a part of her life. Still, it was only during this period of crisis that she began to draw upon it more intentionally as a source of guidance and resilience. As her recovery progressed, LaDean actively pursued opportunities to reconnect with her Indigenous roots through language revitalization, both as a learner and as an emerging educator. She described her growing involvement in community initiatives, taking on the responsibilities of a role model and cultural carrier for younger generations, "my culture and my belief in the culture. Because before, it has always been there."

`This multifaceted approach to healing aligns with research on Indigenous recovery, which emphasizes the therapeutic value of spiritual practices and cultural reconnection. McCormick (2000) identifies "Reconnection with tradition" as the most significant factor in Indigenous healing. He notes that for many, the "return to culture" acts as a protective shield that Western clinical models fail to provide (p. 242). Kirmayer et al. (2011) demonstrate that such practices can foster resilience, a sense of belonging, and long-term wellness within Indigenous communities.

LaDean's narrative of recovery attributes her sobriety to a constellation of influences rather than a single programmatic intervention. She explicitly stated that Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) did not align with her needs, highlighting the sustaining influence of prayer and cultural reconnection. Her healing process unfolded gradually as she re-engaged with spiritual, familial,

linguistic, and communal relationships. This multifaceted approach is consistent with research on Indigenous pathways to healing, which support holistic, culturally grounded strategies that move beyond Western treatment models (Gone, 2009; Rowan et al., 2014).

LaDean provided detailed examples of her commitment to language revitalization, describing how she creates educational videos, songs, and games for children. She discussed adapting familiar family games, such as Battleship and Operation, to teach numbers, letters, and body parts in her Indigenous language. Kirmayer et al. (2011) state that "Language is a repository of cultural knowledge" and that engaging in language revitalization (such as LaDean's videos and games) is a direct act of “cultural continuity" that builds resilience (p. 86). These practical strategies illustrate how healing extends beyond abstinence, encompassing daily acts of cultural continuity and transmission (Rappeport et al., 2025). The use of language as both medicine and method aligns with research demonstrating the therapeutic benefits of cultural and linguistic engagement for Indigenous communities (Gonzalez, 2018; Schillo et al., 2025; Whalen et al., 2022).

Becoming an Elder, Identity Repair, and Survivance

Toward the conclusion of the interview, LaDean reflected on her evolving identity, stating, “In our tribe, I have become an Elder, and I am becoming a well-respected Elder” (see Figure 12). She spoke candidly about her ongoing personal development, acknowledging her challenges with temper and being outspoken. Rather than presenting a perfected narrative of recovery, LaDean situated herself within the continuous, authentic process of growth.

Figure 12

Becoming an Elder - Hummingbird Visits

Note. Photo by Valentina R. Sireech, 2025

This section describes the profound healing that occurs when individuals reconnect with their cultural heritage and identity. LaDean's journey illustrates that this reconnection does not erase pain; instead, it reshapes identity. She transitioned from an Indigenous woman grappling with alcoholism to a leader who embodies the language and traditions of her community. Through this transformation, she moved away from loss and secrecy towards a path of truth-telling and accountability. LaDean embraced her role as an Elder with humility, demonstrating the strength that comes from acknowledging one's history and responsibilities.

How LaDean's Story Sits inside the Chapter 4 Findings

LaDean's narrative serves as a central case study in Chapter 4. Her story moves from early exposure to alcohol and family violence to a turning point inspired by her granddaughter's honesty and Indigenous teachings. Through prayer, reclaiming culture, and language work with children, LaDean's healing reflects research that highlights relational truth-telling and cultural reconnection as vital in Indigenous recovery (Duran, 2006; Gone, 2013; Linklater, 2014; Marsh et al., 2018).

LaDean's story offers insight into healing through relationships and cultural reconnection. Storywork frames her experiences as knowledge, showing how trauma and silence shape alcohol use (Chavarria, 2017; Gone, 2013). Her sobriety demonstrates the strength that comes from reconnecting with spirit, body, family, and culture. Research supports the value of culturally connected, relationship-based recovery among Indigenous populations (Kirmayer et al., 2011; Rowan et al., 2014).

Red Bird's Story

Red Bird, a 36-year-old Indigenous woman, opted to maintain her anonymity and expressly requested that her identity, location, and tribal affiliation remain undisclosed in this

interview. In accordance with her wishes, I modified identifying details to safeguard her privacy and ensure her safety. This decision significantly influences my approach to data collection and analysis, particularly in how I engage with and interpret her narrative. Protecting her identity is a matter of privacy and upholds the ethical principles of authentic sharing of lived experiences. When individuals, particularly women, feel assured that their narratives will not be weaponized against them and recognize that they are in the ongoing process of healing, it is imperative to honor that trust fully. Such an approach underscores the importance of ethical considerations in qualitative research and narrative scholarship.

Early Family Separation and the Search for Stability

Red Bird’s early years were marked by her parents' divorce, which occurred when she was around four or five. Following the separation, she moved with her mother and sister to a new state. Throughout her childhood, she and her sister attended both elementary and high school while maintaining a consistent connection with their father's residence during the summer months.

When asked about her desire for her parents to reconcile, she acknowledged that she harbored such wishes during her early years. However, by the age of ten, she had come to accept the permanence of her parents' separation, which significantly shaped her early development. This experience began with the initial disruption caused by her mother’s subsequent separation. The ongoing transitions between her mother’s and father’s residences required her to continually adjust to differing routines and emotional climates.

Lawson-Te Aho (2014) argues that when traditional kinship structures are disrupted by Western legal frameworks, which often prioritize individual "custody" over communal belonging, it creates a state of being "spiritually un-homed." This "homelessness of the heart"

manifests as a survival-based detachment, in which the child must negotiate two separate worlds (p. 182). According to Lawson-Te Aho , the path to healing involves "re-narrating" these trauma histories to move toward "the achievement of consciousness of the impacts of history on shaping current realities" (p. 181). The ongoing transition between her mother's and father's homes compelled Red Bird to adapt to varying routines, regulations, and emotions.

Values from her Mother and Indigeneity from her Father

Red Bird identifies her mother as the primary influence on her personal values, while her father played a crucial role in nurturing her sense of indigeneity. She fondly reminisces about her father's practice of bringing both her and her sister into the sweat lodge during their early childhood. With a sense of humor, she recalls how, as a child, she would mistakenly refer to the sweat lodge as the "sweater" and express her reluctance to participate. Reflecting on her current perspective, she notes a decline in the number of children attending the sweat lodge. She recognizes the importance of her early participation at the age of four, even though her involvement was limited to the final round. She recalls experiencing a residual emotional impact after the ceremony, despite primarily focusing on sensory details, such as the heat and darkness.

Evans-Campbell (2008) highlights the significance of these early protective factors in her discussion of clinical implications, stating that they offer "adaptive coping mechanisms" essential for helping individuals navigate the complex identity processes and potential exposure to substance use that often arise during adolescence and adulthood (p. 330). Early childhood rituals can shape our emotional and sensory experiences. These experiences are important for our long-term mental health and spiritual well-being. By caring for these early moments, we can build resilience and improve our personal growth.

The Pressure to Belong: Alcohol as a Social Expectancy

Red Brid started using substances at the young age of twelve. Her primary peer group consisted of members of a community to which she held no ancestral ties. Despite high academic achievement and participation in track, she was subjected to lateral violence and exclusion; peers began questioning her indigeneity and highlighting her status as an outsider to their tribe. She stated, "I had good grades, I ran track... then by seventh grade, things changed. Friends started telling me, 'You're not really Native,' and also, 'You're not from our tribe".

During the interview, she struggled to remember a specific moment from her life. Despite her efforts to recall details, she was unable to provide much information. This suggests significant cognitive impairments resulting from early-onset, chronic alcohol consumption (Gonzales & Skewes, 2018; Walters et al., 2010). She connected her current "memory gaps" to heavy drinking during high school, suggesting that the neurobiological effects of adolescent binge drinking may have compromised her ability to recall autobiographical memories.

The interview transitioned to discussing the physiological and temporal effects of her early substance use. Red Bird described the "fog" that clouds her memories of her youth, attributing this lack of clarity to the high volume of consumption during her formative years. She stated, "My memories from when I was young are not very clear. I drank a lot in high school"

The most clinically significant part of the interview occurred when she discussed the "Drunken Indian" stereotype. She stated that her substance use was not a rejection of social norms, but rather a desperate attempt to conform to what she perceived as a distorted version of a "Native" norm.

> There is this overwhelming narrative outside of Indigenous communities that Native people are just 'dunks.' As a kid, I totally bought into that. I thought

> that was the blueprint. My logic back then, it sounds like survival now, was, ‘To be Native and to be accepted, maybe I just need to drink a lot.’ That’s how it started. I thought I was drinking my way into my own identity.

Her logic of 'drinking to belong' validates Gonzalez and Skewes’ (2021, p. 484) research, which identifies the internalization of biological vulnerability as a risk factor that increases substance use frequency. Her narrative also echoes Duran and Duran’s (1995, p. 98) theory of postcolonial psychology, which suggests that the 'drunken Indian' trope can function as a distorted blueprint for identity during the critical developmental window of adolescence.

Embracing Risk: The Acceleration of High Achievement During Adolescence

Red Bird initially emerged as an academically successful student, expressing a strong sense of pride in maintaining a 4.0 GPA and pursuing scholastic achievement. She shared that her academic accomplishments were central to her developing identity and self-worth during this period. However, a significant shift occurred during her seventh-grade year when she began to identify a dramatic change in her trajectory. This phase marked a departure from her previous academic orientation; she began engaging in behaviors that sharply contrasted with her earlier values. Red Bird reported that she began using cigarettes and marijuana, alongside an increase in disciplinary issues at school. These behaviors can be understood as maladaptive coping strategies, suggesting underlying psychological distress or emerging risk factors commonly observed during early adolescence (Brave Heart, 2003; Linklater, 2014).

The behaviors exhibited by Red Bird, specifically the early onset of substance use and increased friction within the educational system, require an analytical shift from individual pathology to a localized manifestation of historical trauma (Brave Heart, 2003, p. 7). While Western psychological frameworks categorize these actions as "maladaptive coping strategies,"

Indigenous scholars argue that such behaviors are often a response to the "cumulative emotional and psychological wounding" transmitted across generations (Brave Heart, 2003, p. 10). The "disciplinary issues" noted in the school setting may also reflect a lack of cultural safety and the ongoing "colonial interference" that disrupts Indigenous youth's connection to community and land-based identity (Cajete, 2015, p. 54).

Returning Home: The Daily Ritual of Drinking – Weekend Warrior

Upon returning home after graduating from college, Red Bird moved back in with her family at 22. This transition was marked by a complex mix of anticipation and uncertainty as she embarked on her journey into adulthood, navigating the weight of her past experiences while eagerly hoping for a fresh start after five years of challenges.

It was during this time that she began to confront her struggles with alcohol use disorder while working for the tribe. In her final year on the reservation, she discovered the resilience necessary to overcome her drinking habits. Reflecting on the preceding four years, she characterized that period as one of the darkest in her life, defined by significant struggles and emotional exhaustion. This introspection allowed her to recognize the profound impact of her experiences as she sought to reclaim her life and forge a healthier future.

She explained that during those years, alcohol became her daily existence, and she often referred to her experience with the phases “high bottom.” A recovery terms that captured her situations: although she drank heavily and even drove under the influence on numerous occasions, she never faced a legal consequence. The lack of external consequences enabled her to maintain a false sense of control. However, Red Bird’s acknowledgment of a "high bottom", while still managing a professional career, underscores the importance of relational accountability in Indigenous recovery. Although she appears to meet the conventional standards

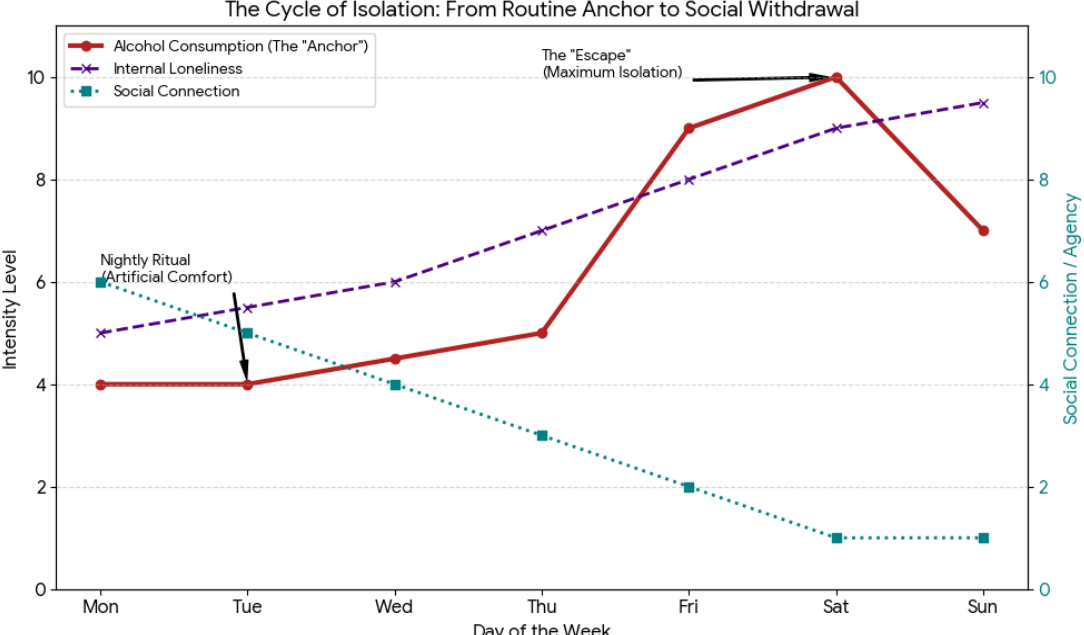
of Western success, the "friction" she experiences reflects a weakened connection to her community and ancestral teachings (Brave Heart, 2003, p. 10).

She gave a name to the persona she inhabited, “functional alcoholic”, and how it worked as self-deception. She was hungover and did not feel good, but she could “clock in” and “get my work done.” She told herself, “it’s not a problem.” She consumed alcohol nightly, and weekends were particularly challenging, as the absence of early morning commitments provided her with a false sense of freedom. She justified her behavior by ensuring her responsibilities were met, convincing herself there was no problem to address, even as her body endured the toll her mind refused to recognize. Drinking evolved into a nightly ritual, anchoring her routine. On weekends, liberated from early morning obligations, she indulged even further, pushing her limits as she sought both escape and relief.

When a person uses alcohol to anchor their life, they are essentially building a house on a foundation of sand. As Duran (2006) argues, the relief found in the bottle is a hollow substitute for genuine healing, eventually leading to an existential crisis where the person no longer knows how to navigate reality without a chemical buffer. This ritual is depicted in Figure 13.

Figure 13

Alcohol's Ritualistic Descent



1. The Artificial Comfort (Monday - Thursday): The nightly ritual serves as a steady baseline of consumption. Although it provides a sense of routine, the purple line representing loneliness continues to rise, while the teal line, indicating social connection steadily declines. This observation aligns with Duran's (2006) argument that a false sense of ceremony replaces true connection, isolating individuals in their own homes.
2. The Escape (Friday-Sunday): On weekends, pushing the limits results in a significant spike in consumption. However, the graph shows that as consumption peaks, loneliness also reaches its highest point. This illustrates Linklater's (2014) point on numbing, and the relief is only a temporary distraction from an increasingly isolated reality.
3. The Social Cost: By the end of the week, the individual's social connection and agency had dropped to its lowest point. The relief sought on the weekend ultimately feeds the cycle of loneliness, making the return to the nightly anchor on Monday feel more necessary for emotional survival.

Alcohol, Depression, and Land-Based Conflict

During the interview, Red Bird was asked if her use of alcohol was part of her coping mechanisms, to which she responded affirmatively. She shared her journey toward emotional literacy, which began in earnest after she achieved sobriety and became involved with Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). Red explained that it was through her participation in AA that she gained the confidence to effectively manage her emotions. She described her early experience of "white-knuckled" sobriety, highlighting the struggles she faced in the first three months before joining AA, where she ultimately received the essential tools for her recovery.

As she navigated the complexities of her life, she began to confront a profound absence of coping strategies. Whenever she encountered a surge of emotion—whether it was sadness, happiness, or anger—her immediate reaction had always been to seek solace in alcohol. This reliance on drinking became a means of escape and avoidance rather than a path toward genuine healing.

Red Bird further identified her workplace as a significant source of stress, a realization that deepened her sense of moral conflict as she faced substantial challenges. Professionally, she was dedicated to protecting land, a calling she cherished; however, she found herself entangled in a web of responsibilities that required her to approve fossil fuel extraction projects. This contradiction placed her deeply at odds with her values, igniting an internal struggle that seemed relentless. As she articulated this persistent conflict, it became clear that her issues were not merely personal but were entwined with broader questions of land stewardship and Indigenous relationships to place. This realization marked a pivotal moment in her journey, pushing her to reflect on the deeper implications of her work and its impact on the land and community she held dear. Through this narrative, she began to understand that her struggles were part of a larger

tapestry of interconnected challenges, prompting her to seek new ways to reconcile her professional duties with her personal ethics. She stated, “I just didn’t know how to handle this, my emotions during this in my life”.

Deloria (2003) argues that Indigenous identity is intrinsically linked to space, founded on a reciprocal relationship with a specific place. For Red Bird, the persistent conflict she experiences reflects spiritual dissonance; she is pressured to treat the land as a mere commodity, even though her spirit recognizes it as a relative. This disconnects from the sacredness of place creates a deep sense of "rootlessness" that goes beyond individual psychology (pp. 62-63). Within Deloria's framework, Red Bird's struggles with chronic depression and alcohol use can be reinterpreted as a form of spatial mourning, representing a reasonable response to the trauma of being compelled to engage in the desecration or clinical management of the very land that defines her existence (p. 122).

Intergenerational Trauma, Maternal Mental Health

Red Bird's journey into her past revealed profound truths about her sadness, which she traced back to deep-seated roots in her childhood. As she paused thoughtfully during the interview, the weight of her reflections settled around us. With a quiet voice, she articulated her beliefs about intergenerational trauma, emphasizing that it stemmed primarily from her mother’s side of the family. This internal struggle affected many relatives, woven into the very fabric of their lineage.

With a heavy heart, she recounted the mental health challenges that marred her family history. Her mother had been diagnosed with bipolar disorder, while her mother’s sister, her aunt, faced her own demons and tragically succumbed to suicidal thoughts. Red Bird felt these familial histories cast a long, daunting shadow over her life, significantly influencing her

emotional landscape during her formative years. She spoke of mental health challenges that seemed to run like a thread throughout her family, manifested in various ways across different generations. In hindsight, she recognized these struggles as expressions of intergenerational trauma, each person's experience unique and yet undeniably connected.

One pivotal event etched in her memory served as a cornerstone of her life story; her mother's battle with postpartum depression culminated in a harrowing psychotic episode on an airplane. This incident led to her mother's hospitalization, creating an emotional void that Red Bird, then a newborn, could not comprehend. "I lost my mom; my mom disappeared," she recalled, her face reflecting the sorrow as she relived that moment of abandonment.

In a tender recollection, she mentioned how, in later years, her mother would humorously claim that as soon as Red Bird learned to walk, she followed her everywhere, even to the bathroom. Yet beneath this lighthearted memory lay a deeper truth. As an adult, while piecing together her life in therapy, Red Bird realized that her attachment to her mother had been intricately laced with fear. The cycle of her mother's absence and return instilled a haunting anxiety that perhaps her mother would once again disappear from her life.

Through her story, Red Bird illuminated the complexities of intergenerational trauma and how it shaped her childhood as well as her understanding of love, fear, and the lifelong quest for connection. Red Bird's journey illustrates how her experience with Alcohol Use Disorder functions as a somatic manifestation of historical trauma and systemic stressors passed down through her lineage (Duran & Duran, 1995, p. 24). The "haunting anxiety" she felt as a child manifested as a desperate need to shadow her mother reflects a fractured attachment style common in families impacted by "cumulative emotional and psychological wounding" across generations (Hartmann & Gone, 2014).

As Evans-Campbell (2008) notes, this trauma operates on a multi-level scale where an individual’s fear of abandonment serves as a direct echo of a community’s history of forced removals and colonial interference (p. 322). Within this context, her mother’s own mental health struggles and periods of absence were shaped by these same external pressures, directly influencing Red Bird's development and her later reliance on substances to numb the hyper-vigilance inherent in her upbringing. By framing her struggle through the lens of Linklater (2014), her recovery becomes a decolonizing process that acknowledges her condition as a "response to trauma" rather than a personal deficiency (p. 25).

Violence, Memory Loss as Protection, and a Brother Who Became a Shelter

During the interview, Red Bird hesitated when discussing her father, aware of his reputation in the community. She revealed that he is now sober, but growing up, he struggled with alcoholism. Reflecting on her childhood, she admitted that her memories are fragmented and hazy, which she attributes to the trauma she experienced. She often compared her recollections to those of her older sister, who, being two years older, seemed to remember everything, while Red Bird found herself grappling with a fog of uncertainty.

A particularly striking story that Red Bird shared was one her mother told her about a violent incident from her early childhood. Her mother recounted that her father had thrown her down the stairs as a baby. However, Red Bird expressed skepticism, suggesting that her mother sometimes exaggerated events. She questioned whether a baby could even survive such an act. Yet, she acknowledged, “Clearly, some abuse happened when I was a baby.”

One of the clearest memories that emerged during therapy involved her older brother, who she viewed as her protector. She described their home layout, noting that her bedroom was just across the hallway from his. When things felt frightening, he would hold her and wrap her in

his arms. In her mind, the moments she felt safest were when he would hide her in his closet, shielding her from the chaos outside. “He took the worst of it,” she recalled, adding, “I think it was because he was a boy, and my father hurt him the most while he protected us.” Red Bird’s candid reflections painted a vivid picture of the violence that permeated their home, offering insight into the complex dynamics of her family life.

Red Bird’s recollection of her brother as a 'shelter' illustrates a critical adaptation of Indigenous kinship in the face of intergenerational trauma. As Methot (2019) notes, the physiological fog of memory loss serves as a protective barrier for the traumatized child, yet this cognitive distance is often only possible because another family member, frequently an older sibling, assumes the role of a physical buffer. While Red Bird’s mind retreated into uncertainty to survive, her brother’s body bore the weight of the violence. In this closet of safety, we see the survival of Indigenous relationality; even when the parental structure is fractured by colonial stressors like alcoholism, the sibling bond maintains a sovereign space of protection and care.

A Mother’s Depression, a Child as Peacekeeper, and Early Suicide Attempts

Red Bird recounted vivid memories of her mother isolating herself in her room for extended periods. As the sole caregiver, her mother had no partner, and from a young age, Red Bird internalized the belief that she was at fault for her mother’s struggles. Household roles shifted, with her older sister assuming the position of challenger -“she would fight with our mother and our battles” - while Red Bird became "mostly the peacekeeper," simply wanting everyone to be happy.

Red Bird described the emotional toll of her mother’s withdrawal, explaining that she blamed herself and, as a result, attempted suicide several times during childhood. Although her mother eventually placed her in therapy, Red Bird recalled disliking the therapist and feeling

compelled to convince everyone that she was fine. She did not want to be seen as another problem, so she withheld her true feelings during therapy, striving to maintain the appearance of normalcy.

Knott (2019) articulates the insidious process of "shame-shifting" as a colonial mechanism that transposes the guilt of systemic violence onto the private shoulders of Indigenous families, particularly children. This shifting occurs when the immense, unaddressed pain of a caregiver, often rooted in the "colonial injury" of isolation and displacement, is left without a communal outlet, forcing the child to absorb the unspoken emotional residue (p. 46). For a childlike Red Bird, "shame-shifting" manifests as the internalized belief that they are the cause of their mother’s withdrawal; the child assumes the "Peacekeeper" role, not out of a natural disposition, but as a survivalist attempt to "fix" a structural void they cannot possibly fill (Knott, 2019, pp. 46-50).

Knott explores how this weight eventually leads to an erosion of the self, where the individual becomes a "collector" of trauma that is not theirs to carry. When the emotional load of being the "Peacekeeper" or the "Problem" becomes unbearable, the only perceived escape is through "numbing” a spectrum of behaviors that includes self-harm and childhood suicide attempts, as Red Bird described. By framing these actions through Knott’s lens, we see that Red Bird’s childhood struggles were not individual psychological failings, but a desperate response to a cycle of shame that had been shifted down through generations, leaving her to "perform normalcy" while drowning in a borrowed grief (Knott, 2019; Linklater, 2014; Methot, 2019; Pihama, 2001).

Spiritual Intervention, Eclipse, Sundance, and a Felt Removal of Craving

Red Bird's journey toward recovery and sobriety unfolded as a deeply spiritual experience, interwoven with moments of struggle, hope, and personal transformation. She reflected on her awareness that alcohol remained the one domain in her life over which she lacked control, a realization that prompted her to pray for strength and guidance. Each weekend, she made a conscious effort to sober up by Saturday night, determined to participate in Sunday Sweat Lodge ceremonies. Her intention was to detoxify her mind and spirit, release the heaviness she carried, and prepare herself for the challenges of the coming week.

A pivotal moment emerged when her brother returned home to attend Sundance, an event of profound cultural and familial significance. Together with her father, Red Bird sought family blessings at the lodge. She vividly recalled that this occurred during an eclipse, an event that in Indigenous tradition carries deep symbolic meaning. In the dim, shifting light, she found herself praying with an intensity she had never known, using the language and ways passed down through generations. As the eclipse reached its fullness, Red Bird sensed a profound internal shift—she described it as if her addiction had crossed to the other side of the eclipse, leaving her changed in a way that defied conventional explanation.

This transformative experience echoed stories she had heard in Alcoholics Anonymous, where individuals spoke of miracles and the intervention of a Higher Power. Red Bird described feeling as though the Creator had lifted her addiction from her, an act of grace that freed her from cravings for alcohol. In the days and weeks that followed, she approached sobriety as a process of coming home to herself rather than a definitive declaration of having quit. Each day became a conscious choice to check in with her feelings, to honor her well-being, and to choose

sobriety, one day at a time, until a month had passed and she recognized, with quiet awe, that something fundamental within her had shifted.

The Relationship Between Spirit and Science

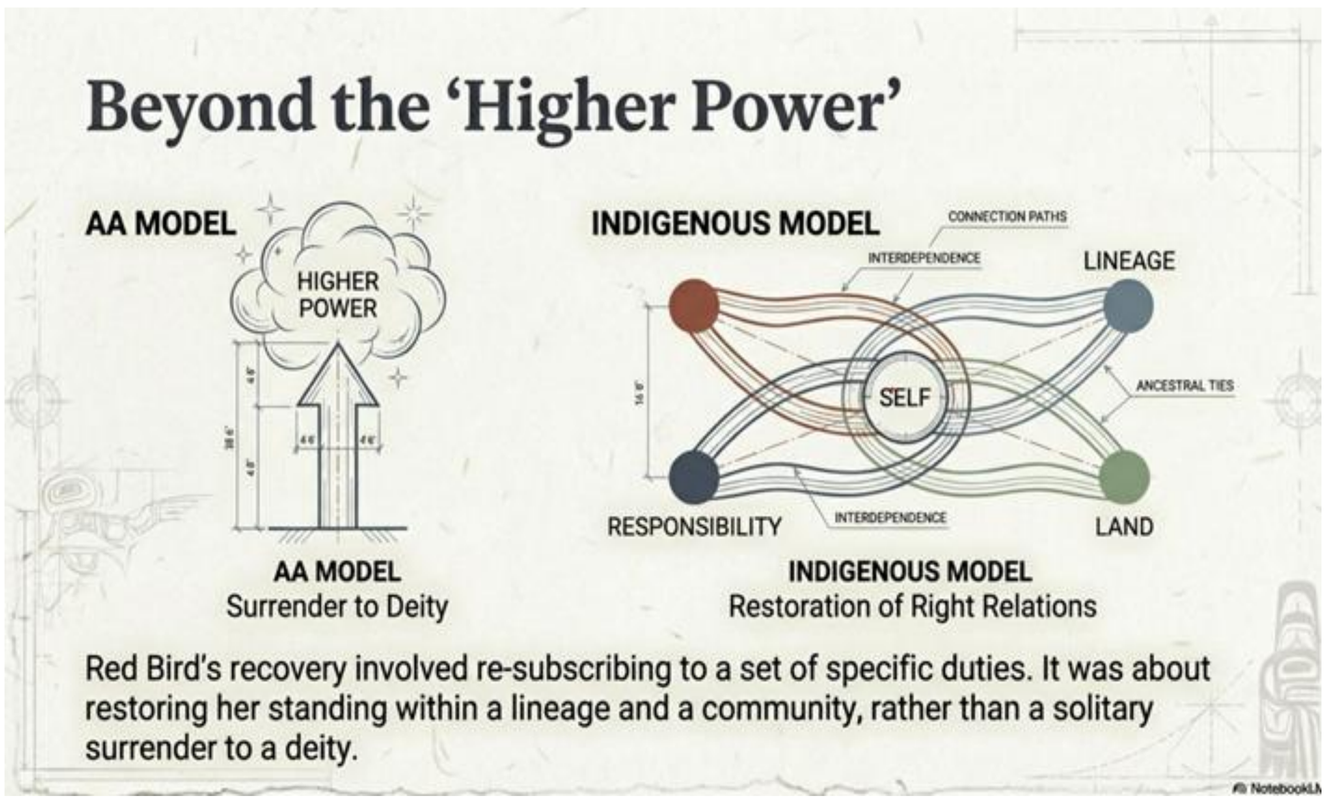
Red Bird's transformation during the eclipse reflects Kawagley's (1995) idea of a "tetrahedral" connection among the human, natural, and spirit worlds. According to this perspective, a change in one realm—such as the celestial occurrence of an eclipse—can create a parallel transformation within the human spirit. Kawagley explains that, for Indigenous peoples, "the universe is alive and has a spirit" (p. 15). As such, Red Bird's prayer was more than a psychological act; it represented a meaningful interaction with a living environment that responded in its own way.

Healing Through Indigenous Law and Responsibility

Although the concept of a "Higher Power" in Alcoholics Anonymous offers a helpful structure, Red Bird's commitment to the "language and ways passed down through generations" aligns with what Napoleon (2013) calls Indigenous legal orders. In this context, sobriety becomes an act of self-governance. Napoleon argues that Indigenous laws are embedded within stories and ceremonies, which "create a framework for managing ourselves" (p. 2). By returning to the Sundance, Red Bird was engaging with ancestral responsibilities and restoring "right relations," rather than simply abstaining from a substance (see Figure 14).

Figure 14

Beyond the "Higher Power"



The Other Side of the Eclipse: Embracing a New Reality

Red Bird's sense that her addiction had "crossed to the other side" resonates with Deloria's (1999) analysis of sacred sites and transformative events. Deloria suggests that particular moments can act as "bridges between the physical and spiritual" (p. 210). Red Bird's experience in the lodge exemplifies what Cajete (2000) describes as "seeking life" a process of harmonizing one's inner world with the greater rhythms of the universe (p. 74).

Red Bird's narrative underscores the deep-rooted connections among celestial guidance, ancestral wisdom, and the individual journey of self-discovery. From my perspective, recovery encompasses more than merely the cessation of harmful behaviors; it symbolizes a reclamation of one's authentic self, facilitated by cultural practices and a genuine willingness to heal. This

journey can be understood as a homecoming, wherein tradition and personal growth are integrated.

In a mixed-media collage, the use of symbols and imagery effectively illustrates themes of renewal and resurgence, particularly as embodied by the Red Bird during the eclipse (see Figure 15). The transformation of Red Bird—from the clutches of addiction to a state of "crossing to the other side"—signifies a profound ontological shift that goes beyond conventional Western definitions of recovery. This perspective is supported by Dewhurst (2014), who argues that art-making in the context of social justice and healing serves as a transformative practice. It enables individuals to re-envision their realities through artistic expression.

Figure 15

The Other Side of the Eclipse

Note. Created by Valentina R. Sireech, 2026

Floralena’s Story

At the outset, Floralena engaged in the respected tradition of Indigenous narrative practice, intentionally situating herself through lineage and community ties. She introduced herself by her full name, clearly articulating the identities of her mother and father, and then acknowledged the elders and family members who nurtured her during her formative years. Through these initial statements, the depth of her connections became evident. Belonging was established through the recognition of kinship, a sense of duty was expressed in honoring those who came before, and the importance of survival emerged through the enduring bonds of love and mutual support.

As I listened, it became clear that her stories were alive, dynamic vessels of wisdom shaped by experience. Her memories unfolded with a quiet rhythm, moving from the innocence of childhood to the responsibilities of adulthood. She described how those once cared for become caretakers themselves, and how protection transforms into the will to protect others. This form of storytelling resonates deeply with Indigenous Storywork - lessons are shared through words, through relationships, cultural practices, and spiritual understanding, all rooted in lived reality (Absolon, 2022; Archibald, 2008; Smith, 2012). These teachings are offered forward, becoming meaningful guidance for generations yet to come.

Adoption, Grandparents, and a Life Shaped by Care

Floralena recounted her mother’s pregnancy at the age of sixteen and the subsequent decision to pursue adoption. In a moment of unwavering conviction, her grandparents declared, “no, that’s our daughter,” and formally adopted Floralena when she was one month old. She offered a vivid description of growing up as an only child in her grandparents’ home, a place she would later return to as an adult, this time as a caretaker. Floralena emphasized that caring for

her grandfather is a collaborative, everyday commitment she shares with her husband. She situated her daily routines and relationships within the same home where her childhood unfolded, providing a richly textured account of continuity and deep familial bonds as her grandfather, now in his eighties, continues to reside there.

Floralena also identified the passing of her grandmother as a profoundly transformative event. She expressed a deep sense of fulfillment at being present and attentive during her grandmother's final years, reflecting, "I was available to be here when she needed me the most" This period was marked by a heightened sense of responsibility and emotional presence, which she described with both pride and tenderness.

Floralena's narrative serves as a profound testament to the relational accountability that defines an Indigenous research paradigm, where knowledge is a lived relation rather than a static commodity (Wilson, 2008). By intertwining love through acts of caretaking, she engages in a cycle of embodied relational knowledge that mirrors the *Nishnaabeg* practice of *biiskbiyang* or returning to oneself through the Anishinaabe lens of reciprocity and deep connection (Simpson, 2011). Ultimately, Floralena's experience confirms that the environment for learning is inseparable from the roots of relations that support it, transforming individual acts of care into a collective methodology for cultural survival and growth.

Sheltered Childhood and First Glimpse of the Outside

Floralena offered a nuanced portrayal of her early childhood with her grandparents, characterizing this period as deeply sheltered and intimately protected. She recollected, with vivid detail, the sensation of riding in a grocery cart alongside her grandmother, her small voice repeatedly asking for "kisses, kisses". In response, her grandmother offered gentle affection, providing warm, physical closeness and small tokens of love, such as her favorite foods and

small dollar-store toys. These memories painted a portrait of a childhood marked by attentive, almost enveloping care, in which emotional and material needs were anticipated and met in equal measure.

She also articulated how her grandparents' vigilant protection profoundly shaped the contours of her social world. Floralena recalled that her daily routine followed a strict rhythm - school, then straight home, leaving little time for extended time with friends. She recounted a singular teenage outing that swiftly devolved into chaos, culminating in the destruction of mailboxes along a rural road. The episode, she reflected, became an indelible early lesson in the motivations underlying her grandparents' close guardianship, revealing the protective logic that governed her formative years.

Within Floralena's narrative, childhood emerges as a space defined by both profound comfort and palpable influence, shaping her later decisions. The assurance of safety held a certain weight, and as Floralena reflected, the eventual pursuit of freedom carried a sense of exhilaration akin to drawing a deep, liberating breath, alluringly heightened by the remembered boundaries of her upbringing and the ever-present awareness of risk.

I have always believed that being raised by one's grandparents would be a blessing and a safeguard against trouble. Floralena's account of her grandparents' vigilant protection reflects the maternal guardianship described by Campbell (1973), in which the home is depicted as a fortress safeguarding Indigenous kinship from external threats. Campbell describes her Cheechum (Grandmother) as a figure whose "strength and wisdom" were the primary forces preventing the family from succumbing to "self-pity" or disintegration (Campbell, 1973, p. 15).

Hogan (1995) identifies the ancestral "logic of guardianship." She captures these tensions between safety and the pull of autonomy, noting that for young women, the journey toward

selfhood involves navigating “the remembered boundaries of upbringing” in a world where everything was a risk (Hogan, 1995, p. 22). In the interview, Floralena stated that her propensity for risk-taking enabled her to seek alternatives to a restrictive home environment. This inclination ultimately empowered her to select her own pathways in life.

Alcohol in the Home, Violence, and Early Normalization

During the interview, Floralena provided a candid account of the role alcohol played in her childhood home, particularly through her grandfather's habitual drinking. She recounted a vivid memory from her early years when her grandmother, overwhelmed by frustration and anger, chased her grandfather out of the house, wielding a two-by-four studded with nails. In the moment, these incidents seemed like ordinary occurrences within her daily life. However, as time passed and she reflected on those experiences, she began to discern the complex emotions and underlying dynamics they represented. This introspection granted them new significance in her adult understanding, highlighting the interplay of trauma and resilience in her upbringing.

Floralena’s story sheds light on the subtle and pervasive ways children absorb instability in their environments. Growing up, she faced recurring patterns of alcohol use, anger, and conflict, which inevitably shaped her responses as her nervous system developed. These experiences turned unpredictable surroundings into a lasting internal landscape of anxiety and tension. According to Brave Heart (2003), the traits of heightened vigilance and the tendency to remain silent aren’t just quirks of personality; they are indicators of a Historical Trauma Response. This concept highlights how children adapt their nervous systems to navigate a world filled with chronic stress and unpredictability. While these survival strategies are essential during childhood, they often linger into adulthood, manifesting as what some call "silent endurance” (p. 11). This means that the very mechanisms that once safeguarded Floralena resulted in her

heightened awareness and emotional distance, which became significant obstacles to her relationships and personal well-being.

As described by Walters et al. (2010), living in a constant state of "high alert" can lead to an overwhelming allostatic load, in which the body's stress-response system is continually activated (p. 166). For Floralena, this means that the survival skills she relied on as a child, like hyper-vigilance and emotional withdrawal, now create barriers to experiencing joy and connection in her adult life. These barriers feel like heavy weights, hindering her ability to find peace and establish healthy relationships. Through her journey, it becomes clear how the echoes of a tumultuous childhood can profoundly shape the adult experience, emphasizing the need for understanding and healing as she seeks to navigate her world anew.

Addiction in the Family System and Childhood Survival

As her story progressed, Floralena recounted the time she spent with her mother and the instability brought on by her mother's addiction. Reflecting on my personal history, I observed long periods spent in the presence of my mother, with instability woven into the daily fabric of life due to her addiction. The weekends often carried the sounds of loud music, unfamiliar adults arriving and leaving, and a charged atmosphere of unpredictability. My siblings and I assumed the role of caregivers, preparing meals, comforting one another, and managing household responsibilities far beyond our years. An acute sense of duty compelled me to protect my younger sisters. I recall the scrape of wood against the floor as I dragged a heavy dresser to block our bedroom door and the metallic click of the lock, creating a fragile boundary of security.

The profound sense of helplessness that Floralena experienced as a child as she navigated the complexities of the adult world remains vividly etched in her memory. She often recognized the detrimental nature of her circumstances yet felt utterly voiceless. As

she poignantly articulated, she was aware that her situation was harmful; however, she believed she had no choice but to endure it. This reflection captures the emotional landscape of her early years and resonates with research showing that children raised in chaotic environments often develop survival strategies rooted in endurance and compliance (Brave Heart, 2003).

Duran & Duran (1995) emphasize that when children are formed into adult-like labor and caregiving roles, it is a direct response to systemic disruptions in their environment. Living in a state of constant hyper-vigilance, these children must continually monitor their surroundings for instability or emotional shifts in their household, a burden that settles in the body as a profound "deep exhaustion." This premature responsibility reflects the enduring pressures, such as poverty and the breakdown of traditional support structures, that leave gaps a child feels compelled to fill (Duran & Duran, 1995, p. 34). In this view, addiction is reframed as a strategy to manage the accumulated weight of a childhood spent performing the labor of an adult, seeking a moment of peace in a life defined by chronic stress and the duty to protect others.

In Floralena's story, there is a steady movement between rupture and return, between places where she took root and places where she rebuilt breath, focus, and belonging. She mentions that she ran away, and after that, she was sent to boarding school, a setting marked by hardship, yet it became a turning point for her. She located safety within those difficult conditions, naming the boarding school as the place where she felt safe. She described an academic focus, skipping a grade, graduating on time from junior high school, and choosing another boarding school for high school. Her accounts read as a shift in risk and protection. The environment-imposed structure and predictable

routines reduced exposure to alcohol and drugs and opened space for self-regulation. Her sustained friendships in school signaled attachment repair through peers who offered stability, shared identity, and daily witnessing. In the language of Indigenous Storywork (Archibald, 2008), this reflects healing as reconnection. Changed conditions supported a restored capacity to think, study, and imagine a future, which aligns with holistic restoration through a renewed relational network.

The term Indian Boarding School frequently conjures images of forced removal; however, in contemporary discussions, it pertains to institutions designed to support Indigenous students facing difficulties adapting to conventional educational systems (Deyhle & Swisher, 1997). Cajete (1994) argues that the most insidious violence of colonial boarding schools lay in their attempt to replace traditional creative imagination with a rigid, “mechanistic thinking” aimed at assimilation (p. 209). This legacy underscores the lasting influence of educational practices on Indigenous communities, emphasizing the urgent need to reevaluate our understanding and support for Indigenous education today. By recognizing this historical context, we can aim to develop more inclusive and culturally relevant educational frameworks that honor and uphold Indigenous identities and knowledge systems.

In examining the deep emotional scars that can arise from such experiences, we turn to Floralena's narrative, which takes a difficult turn as she reflects on a painful moment tied to her first experience with sexual intimacy at the age of thirteen. She recounted, “I found out I wasn’t a virgin,” a realization that was intricately linked to her emerging awareness of childhood sexual abuse memories she had struggled to fully recall. This moment profoundly shifted her inner world, leaving her feeling as though she had “nothing to protect,” a state she described as “open season” for harmful behaviors.

Floralena detailed a broader familial cycle of abuse, identifying male relatives who harmed women across generations. She connected her own experiences to the narratives of abuse relayed by her mother, reflecting a growing awareness of these intergenerational patterns. This analysis underscores concepts of memory fragmentation and the transformative effects of sexual violence on self-worth, bodily autonomy, and overall safety (Methot, 2019). Floralena's phrase, "nothing to protect," encapsulates a significant breakdown in self-protective mechanisms, often paralleling increased substance use, heightened sexual risk, and greater exposure to violence (Knott, 2019). The entrenched family norm of silence further intensifies this trauma, as children are conditioned to endure their suffering in silence, resulting in their bodies internalizing what remains unexpressed. In this environment, substances frequently become accessible coping strategies for emotional numbing, sleep difficulties, and a temporary sense of control. Thus, my research situates this phenomenon at the core of addiction, framing it as a form of disconnection from physical safety, from coherent memory constructs, and from trust within interpersonal relationships (Knott, 2019; Methot, 2019).

During the interview, Floralena was prompted to discuss her understanding of the spirit of inherited teaching, a concept deeply rooted in her cultural heritage. She recounted a poignant memory involving her grandmother, who shared an account of a funeral marked by a profound spiritual experience: the sighting of a deceased loved one's spirit in a car, departing from his own funeral. This experience, Floralena noted, was her initial encounter with the spiritual realm and she framed it as an example of Indigenous giftedness, asserting that as Indigenous people, this kind of spiritual perception is a unique blessing and a form of medicine.

This portion of her narrative is significant because it elucidates how spirituality serves as a form of epistemology, an understanding of knowledge derived from lived experiences, kinship

teachings, and cultural practices (Hampton, 1995; Linklater, 2014). When examined through the lens of healing and recovery, this experience can be interpreted as a process of meaning-making, functioning as a protective worldview and providing guidance. Moreover, it supports the continuity of identity across generations, thereby bolstering resilience in the face of trauma and grief, which often threaten to fragment the self.

In Storywork, the concept of spirit remains a pivotal element in how narratives convey and interpret significant life events, ultimately revealing pathways to healing. Floralena's story, deeply influenced by her grandmother's teachings, exemplifies this continuity, effectively carrying forward the wisdom of her ancestors (Archibald, 2008). Through her narrative, we gain insight into the intricate connections among spirituality, identity, and healing within Indigenous communities.

As the interview concluded, Floralena addressed the concept of recovery by explicitly acknowledging the reality of intergenerational trauma. She shared, "Intergenerational trauma is real," underlining how her heightened awareness of this issue has enabled her to break harmful cycles within her family and community. She also reflected on contemporary societal changes, noting significant shifts in technology, the experiences of today's youth, and their early exposure to drugs and sexual activity.

When discussing the impact of alcohol and other substances, she connected these behaviors to the coping strategies prevalent in her upbringing. She remarked, "You don't talk about your problems, you just drink them away," emphasizing the cultural norms that discouraged open conversations about mental health and emotional struggles.

Floralena described her experiences of learning about trauma bonding as part of her recovery journey and how this conceptual framework facilitated her path toward forgiveness

regarding her mother and grandmother. In the context of my study, this process can be understood as a form of reinterpretation. The introduction of recovery language provided her with new avenues to articulate experiences of harm without succumbing to shame (Duran, 2006). By identifying trauma bonding, she began to delineate relational patterns with greater specificity. This transformation often signals a shift from survival-based attachment to a chosen form of attachment. In this stage, individuals learn to distinguish love from harm, loyalty from silence, and connection from enmeshment. My findings demonstrate that recovery offers new terminologies for previously unaddressed wounds and underscores the role of language as a vital tool for restoring personal agency and fostering relational accountability.

In her reflections, Floralena articulated how grief and matriarchal responsibility profoundly transformed both her memories and her position within the family structure. Following her mother's death, she recounted the resurgence of memories that compelled her to assume a maternal role for her sister. Floralena emphasized a commitment to shared survival, stating, "We got to do this together" and "We got to stick together." She also highlighted the importance of extended family, underscoring the notion of collective strength in which they are "stronger together." As I analyzed this research, it became evident that bereavement often reactivates traumatic memories. This occurs not only through emotional flooding but also through the loss of a relational anchor, even in multifaceted, complex relationships.

Floralena's description of stepping into a caregiving role reveals the duality of role strain and caregiver burden. However, it also reflects Indigenous kinship ethics, where well-being is rooted in communal responsibility. I interpret this as a recovery process enacted as a communal practice, manifesting in daily acts of care, such as helping, feeding, listening, and staying close to one another. This perspective aligns with Indigenous methodologies that prioritize relational

accountability and emphasize the strength inherent in extended support networks (Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008).

Floralena's narrative illustrates a profound journey from intergenerational trauma, characterized by alcoholism, abuse, and neglect, to resilience achieved through recovery and a reconnection with her cultural roots. Her experience underscores the importance of understanding past trauma as a means of empowering healing.

The role of chosen family, particularly her grandparents, and structured environments, such as boarding schools, provided essential support systems that served as critical anchors during her healing process. Today, Floralena embodies resilience as she actively works to break cycles of abuse, promote family unity, and preserve traditional values. Together with her husband, she co-organizes the Uintah Basin branch of Addicts to Athletes and is actively engaged in the recovery community within their region. This commitment highlights her dedication to fostering a supportive network for others on their paths to recovery.

Nonie's Story

In this study, I aimed to explore Indigenous Storywork (Archibald, 2008) as a powerful medium for storytelling and connection. This final section is dedicated to my sister, who has been both our protector and the guardian of our shared memories. By sharing our narratives, we embark on a profound journey of healing from past traumas (Curtice, 2025). This study explores themes of love and remembrance, focusing on kinship disruption and resilience. It highlights the importance of these connections in fostering healing and understanding within our communities, while also seeking to understand how these experiences relate to others in our shared lives and histories.

I met with my sister on a Sunday evening, hoping to engage her in conversation about her experiences. However, she appeared hesitant to share her story, suggesting that we postpone the discussion until the following week. I sensed her apprehension stemmed from a fear of how I might perceive her after hearing her narrative. Throughout our lives, I had never been fully informed of the details surrounding her struggles, particularly her reliance on alcohol and other substances as coping mechanisms. I suspect that her abusive relationships may have been her way of filling the void created by our family's intergenerational traumas and the deep-seated loneliness she experienced.

As I reflect on this difficult yet necessary conversation, I recognize the courage it takes to confront these painful realities. Understanding her journey involves uncovering the past; it honors our shared experiences and embraces the complexities of healing within our familial bonds. Through this narrative, I hope to illuminate the pathways of resilience and the significance of storytelling as we navigate our healing journey together.

Early Harm and Pain of Separation

Nonie began by describing her childhood, characterized by significant memory gaps. She recalled vivid fragments of her early life, such as a barn located behind her grandmother's house and an unsettling encounter with an older cousin who had committed acts of sexual molestation when she was around seven or eight years old. Nonie expressed that much of her early life remains a blur, particularly during the years she struggled with substance use, which she believes contributed to her memory loss. However, she clearly remembers spending time at her grandmother's house, a place that contrasted sharply with the idealized notion of warmth and love. Instead, she described it as cold and unwelcoming, especially for her and her siblings.

One vivid memory that surfaced was of her mother's sweater, which she had placed in her bed. Nonie remembered clinging to that sweater, crying for her mother because of the comfort the familiar scent provided. Yet, her solace was short-lived. She recounted being chastised for her tears, with threats of punishment if she did not stop crying.

As we delved deeper into her family dynamics, Nonie spoke poignantly about the influence of alcohol on her parents' relationship. She recounted how her father, under the influence, engaged in acts of domestic violence. She said, "Our father came back from drinking and started to fight with mom, and then stabbed her arm, and there was blood everywhere." Her voice trembled as she shared this painful memory, highlighting the chaos and fear that permeated her early years.

Nonie reflected on her home environment, which was both physically and emotionally harsh. Her grandmother and aunt often exhibited unkind behavior, employing wooden spoons as a form of discipline. Additionally, there was a distressing episode in which her ears were forcibly pierced, ostensibly for protection. These recollections reveal the complexities of her upbringing and illuminate the profound impact of traumatic experiences on her childhood. Nonie's story also serves as a reminder of the resilience of the human spirit amid such profound adversity. These memories establish a foundational pattern. Harm enters through kinship proximity, and care feels inconsistent.

The experience of being left in the care of family members is something many can relate to, and it often leads to significant harm and adverse childhood experiences. In my research, I found that Nonie exhibited signs of hypervigilance, particularly in her early years. This was largely influenced by the profound grief resulting from her mother's absence and the constant need to navigate the threats posed by paternal violence. These observations resonate with

Methot's (2019) conceptualization of trauma as a physiological "imprint" rather than a mere memory. Methot asserts that when a primary caregiver is unable to provide consistent co-regulation, the child's developing nervous system can become trapped in a state of survival response (p. 64).

In this framework, the later onset of substance use can be understood not just as a secondary pathology but as a functional, albeit destructive, attempt to regain the emotional regulation that was disrupted during childhood. Nonie's "memory gaps" point to a dissociative defense mechanism, which Methot (2019) connects to the systemic fragmentation of Indigenous family units under colonial stress. In this context, the body often serves as a repository for pain that the narrative mind struggles to process at such a young age (p. 72). This interplay of trauma and survival highlights the profound impact of early childhood experiences on emotional regulation and coping mechanisms, framing the conversation around childhood adversity in a more nuanced and personal context (Evans-Campbell, 2008; Gutiérrez, 2024; Linklater, 2014; Methot, 2019).

Using the Cottonwood metaphor, Figure 16 is structured from the ground up, showing how systemic "soil" conditions lead to observable "canopy" behaviors (Absolon, 2022).

1. **Soil and Environment (Colonial Context) r**epresent the foundational level of harm described by Methot (2019). For Nonie, this is where kinship proximity harm and lateral violence (the father's intoxication/stabbing) took root. These events represent interconnected family issues rooted in environmental conditions caused by colonial disruption (Absolon, 2022).
2. **Roots/Taproot (Foundational Trauma)** represent the specific traumatic events Nonie recounts. Sexual abuse by the cousin and caregiver abandonment are the

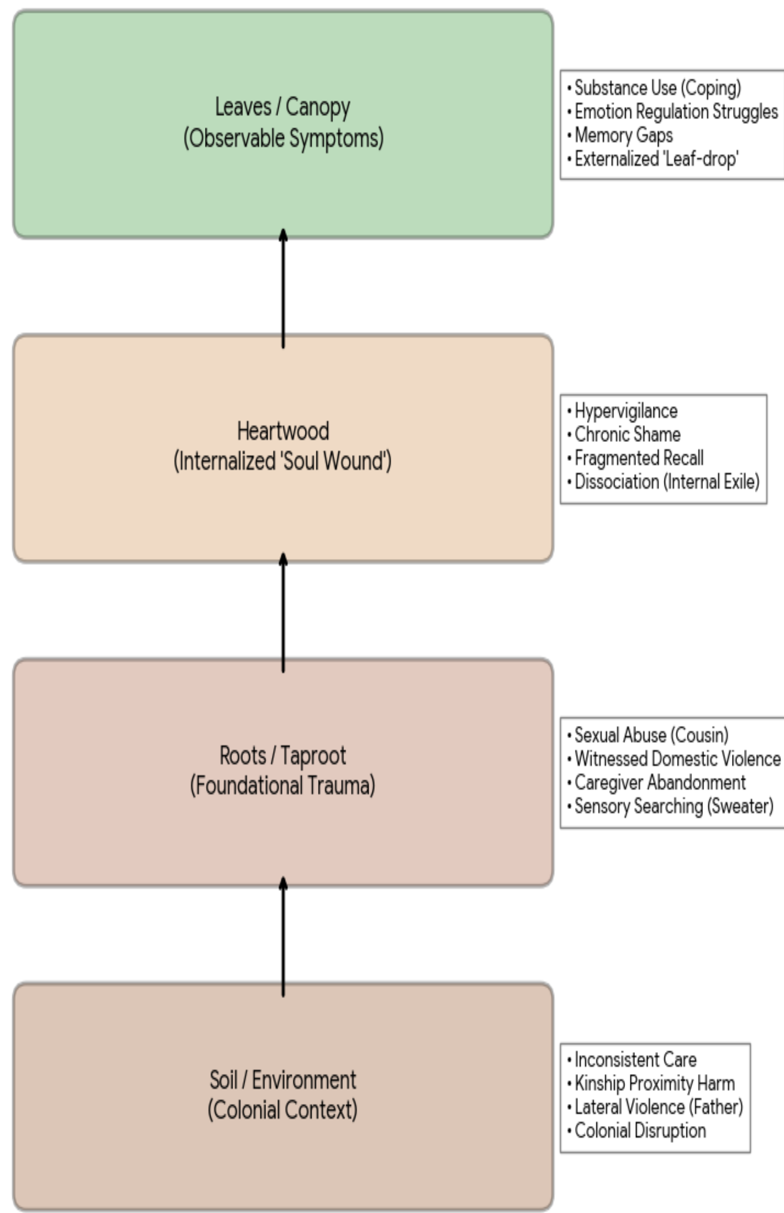
taproots that forced her to search for safety (the sensory search for the mother's sweater).

3. **Heartwood (Internalized Pain):** As the tree grows, trauma is internalized. This is where the clinical markers of hypervigilance, chronic shame, and dissociation (the internal exile that creates memory gaps) reside (Aho, 2014; Anda et al., 2006).
4. **Leave/Canopy (Observable Symptoms):** This is the most visible part of the system. Substance use is reframed here as a leaf-drop, a survival strategy to conserve the tree's core during a drought of care. It manifests as struggles with emotion regulation and the fragmented recall observed in the clinical assessment (Linklater, 2014; Marsh et al., 2015).

When we consider Nonie's sensory searching in relation to the Cottonwood's root system, it becomes clear that her behaviors shouldn't be viewed as pathologies but rather as adaptations to a harmful environment shaped by violence.

Figure 16

Nonie's Early Years Framework Cottonwood Metaphor



Preadolescence: Identity and Escalation (Ages 10-12)

By age ten, Nonie was already assuming adult responsibilities, such as driving her intoxicated father home from saloons. At eleven, she began drinking alcohol and smoking marijuana to "fit in" and gain acceptance among peers who teased her for being small.

Reflecting on her elementary school experience, Nonie vividly described an environment marked by corporal punishment and public humiliation. She recounts a particularly jarring incident involving the principal, who seized her by the ear and administered a swat after she was involved in a fight. Nonie expresses that her school was steeped in racism, directly labeling it as such. She recalls enduring derogatory names that shaped her responses and attitudes; terms like "squaws," "sand niggers," and "sand monkeys" were regularly directed at her and her cousins. This constant verbal abuse, primarily from white boys at the school, contributed to her frequent confrontations. School becomes a place where adults harm her and peers mark her body and identity with racial violence. In Nonie's narrative frames, fighting is presented as protection and as a response to public degradation. In effect, fighting becomes a language of survival when respectful care feels absent.

Nonie's experience illustrates how the intersection of systemic racism and institutional discipline profoundly influenced her childhood and personal development (Marsh et al., 2015). As Simpson (2017) argues, these institutional pressures are designed to disconnect Indigenous children from their inherent self-worth and cultural kinship ties. This disconnection is visible in Nonie's early memories of fragmented care, where the state's standard of discipline overrides the communal and familial healing practices that Brave Heart (2003) describes as essential for mitigating historical trauma.

Betrayal Trauma, Bodily Strategies, and the Cost of Disclosure

During this segment of the interview, Nonie paused and shared that she had never disclosed this information to anyone before, indicating it was something she had kept private. I believe that she was taking measures to protect herself, suggesting a level of personal accountability in her decision to withhold this disclosure. The most profound trauma experienced during this period was the repeated sexual abuse inflicted by her grandfather. In response to this devastating ordeal, Nonie developed a psychological and physical defense mechanism characterized by bedwetting. She understood that if her bed was wet, her grandfather would refrain from approaching her, providing her a temporary sense of security.

Despite the gravity of her situation, Nonie felt compelled to keep her trauma a secret from her mother. This secrecy was met with confusion and shame; her mother, unable to comprehend the underlying issues, publicly humiliated Nonie by labeling her a "piss pot". When Nonie attempted to share her painful experiences, her mother dismissed her claims, likely in denial, as the abuser was her own father. Nonie's father, recognizing the danger his daughter faced, took steps to protect her by having her grandfather removed from their home.

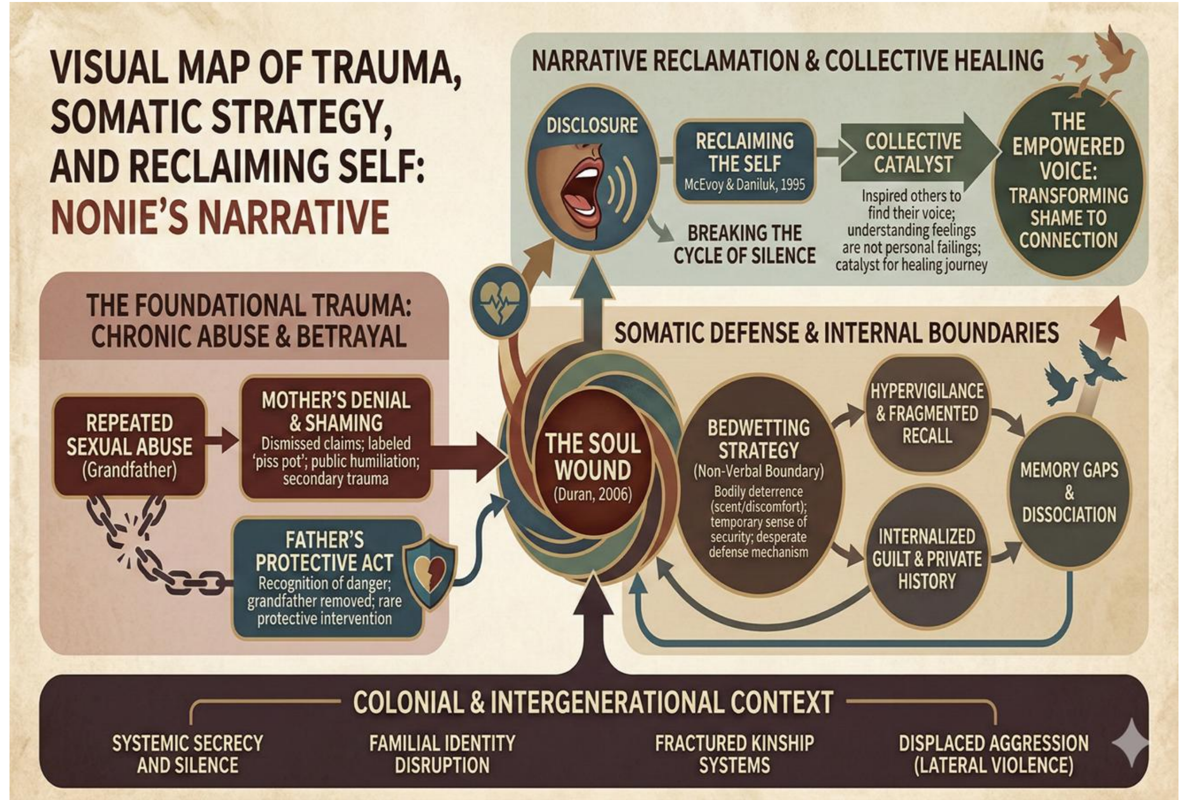
This intricate interplay of trauma, secrecy, and family dynamics underscores the profound effects of abuse and the difficulties associated with seeking support within familial settings. Nonie seems to intend to convey this facet of her life in order to connect with individuals who grapple with similar feelings of shame. By sharing her experiences, she may inspire others to articulate their own narratives and understand that such feelings are not a reflection of their personal failings. This narrative can serve as a catalyst for others to find their voice and embark on their own healing journeys.

Nonie's narrative aligns closely with the findings of McEvoy and Daniluk (1995), who characterize the sexual abuse of Aboriginal women as a "wound of the soul" that disrupts the very fabric of familial and cultural identity (Duran, 2006). Nonie's use of bedwetting as a physical deterrent, creating a boundary through her own body, illustrates the resourceful yet desperate defense mechanisms described by McEvoy & Daniluk, where survivors must find ways to navigate environments where protection is otherwise absent. Furthermore, her mother's denial and the subsequent shaming of Nonie reflect the "complex interplay of secrecy and silence" that McEvoy & Daniluk (p. 231) identify as a secondary trauma; when the family unit is fractured by colonial and intergenerational pressures, the victim is often blamed to preserve the family's precarious stability. Ultimately, by choosing to disclose her story now, she is engaging in the reclaiming of self, which is essential for healing and for transforming a private history of shame into a collective catalyst for breaking the cycle of silence.

This graphic image transitions from a private history of shame into a collective catalyst for healing. By framing Nonie's bedwetting as a resourceful somatic defense, it reframes a source of childhood humiliation into a strategic bodily boundary used to survive kinship betrayal. Figure 17 illustrates how her current disclosure is a deliberate act of narrative reclamation that breaks the cycle of silence. By externalizing the "sound wound," Nonie transforms personal trauma into a decolonial tool, inviting others to move past systemic shame and find their own voice (Duran, 2026; Linklater, 2014).

Figure 17

Visual Map of Trauma, Somatic Strategy, and Reclaiming Self



Substance Use and Trying to Find Identity

Nonie described a profound conflict with her mother, who actively suppressed her Indigenous identity. Her mother forbade her and her siblings from learning the Ute language or participating in traditional dances, which she believed contributed to their cultural alienation. This suppression may have stemmed from her mother's own feelings of shame surrounding their mixed heritage, particularly in light of her husband being a "Terminated Ute." At the age of 11, in the 1950s, he lost his enrollment status, further complicating the family's identity (Metcalf, 2002). Termination acted as a form of state-sponsored identity theft. For Nonie's father, the loss of federal recognition meant the loss of protective cultural frameworks, which is a known risk factor for substance use disorders.

During her junior high years, Nonie was first introduced to the use of "speed"

(amphetamines), which she favored for its ability to energize and motivate her. Her family's frequent relocations between Salt Lake City and the reservation were primarily driven by her father's unstable job situation. This constant moving exacerbated her feelings of disconnection and a sense of belonging. The enduring sense of disconnection characterized her experiences throughout her life, particularly as she navigated the complex terrain of cultural identity shaped by her mixed heritage and her mother's perspectives. This ongoing internal struggle to reconcile these facets of her identity constitutes a crucial element of her personal narrative.

Nonie's story exemplifies what Thistle (2019) describes as "Indigenous homelessness," which encompasses a profound "dislocation of the soul” resulting from the loss of land, language, and familial connections (p. 6). Nonie's contemporary exploration of her identity can be interpreted as a decolonial act; by articulating the "state-sponsored identity theft" experienced through her father’s termination, she transitions from being a mere "subject" of colonial policy to assuming the role of an author of her own narrative. This shift underscores the agency she seeks as she seeks to reclaim her identity and heritage (Smith, 2012). Smith asserts that "the story" serves as a critical site of resistance.

Relationships, Violence, Dependence, and Survival

Throughout her adult life, Nonie experienced multiple abusive relationships, providing a clear and detailed account of intimate partner violence. She vividly describes one incident: "He grabbed me by the neck and threw me up against the wall". In her efforts to escape these dangerous situations, she often resorted to placing knives around her home, meticulously planning potential escape routes.

Nonie's narrative also includes harrowing experiences of being held hostage and subjected to threats of lethal violence. She recalls a particularly frightening moment when her

children had to escape through a window to seek help while she endured brutal beatings. In another relationship, compounded by her struggles with addiction, her partner inflicted physical injuries upon her. Despite this violence, she remained in the relationship due to her dependence on substances. She shared, "After a severe beating, they found out I had two broken ribs, and I stayed with him because of the drugs". These accounts highlight the pervasive nature of intimate partner violence and underscore the complex interplay of addiction along with the difficulty of breaking free from such toxic relationships (NI MMIWG, 2019).

The harrowing cycle of violence and addiction described in Nonie's narrative is best understood through Brave Heart's (2003) framework of historical trauma, which posits that the collective trauma of colonization often manifests in the present as substance use and internalized interpersonal violence (pp. 7-10). This is a critical issue as Indigenous women face some of the highest risks of violence in North America; they are murdered at rates up to ten times the national average and are significantly more likely to experience physical assault and stalking (Deer, 2015, pp. 15-19).

In her 2015 work, Deer discusses how the widespread nature of abuse experienced by Indigenous women is deeply rooted in legal and social frameworks that have historically denied them adequate protection. This lack of systemic support forces these women to confront extreme violence with few resources to aid them. Nonie's continued reliance on substances, even after sustaining injuries, exemplifies the complex dynamics that Duran & Duran (2007) identify as a survival response to intense environmental stressors and the absence of culturally safe interventions.

TallBear (2013) highlights the erosion of traditional communal kinship structures that once served as a vital safety net against domestic violence. Nonie's experiences reflect the

ongoing and cumulative pressures of colonial trauma, underscoring the urgent need for a holistic and culturally responsive approach to healing and reclamation. Her story serves as a powerful reminder of the challenges faced by Indigenous women and the critical importance of restoring supportive structures within their communities.

Surviving and Reconnecting to Kinship

Over the years, Nonie's recovery journey revealed significant shifts in her relationships, particularly with her mother. Initially marked by conflict, their relationship gradually transformed, leading to deeper closeness over time. This evolving dynamic became even more poignant following her mother's death in 2007. In a reflective moment, Nonie expressed, "I just stopped, and without the influence of any medical detox, I prayed. I felt the presence of my mother, my grandmothers, and the spirit of my family surrounding me, guiding me through this difficult time". This statement underscores the profound impact of family bonds and spiritual connections in Nonie's healing process. It highlights her emotional struggles and the supportive role of her family's legacy in overcoming adversity. Through this narrative, we can appreciate the intricate interplay among personal recovery, familial relationships, and the enduring strength of ancestral ties.

Conclusion

Storywork provides a vital framework for engaging with the complexities inherent in Indigenous narratives, thereby safeguarding these stories from oversimplification and fostering healing through a commitment to honesty (Archibald, 2008; Smith, 2012). The findings from this study highlight the profound richness of Indigenous storytelling, underscoring its essential role in recognizing the multifaceted nature of lived experiences. In examining the narratives of Red Bird, LaDean, Floralena, and Nonie, a significant pattern emerged. While these women shared

their experiences with alcohol and substance use, their stories revealed deeper, underlying issues. These issues are rooted in adverse childhood experiences, disrupted attachments, exposure to family violence, spiritual grief, and an enduring desire for a safe sense of belonging. These narratives suggest that addiction often develops in contexts characterized by disconnection. Such conditions are where children learn to prioritize fear over safety, silence over expression, and survival over trust.

These findings are directly relevant to my research question, which explores how story, memory, land, and Indigenous methodologies enhance our understanding of alcohol and substance use while facilitating the reclamation of personal narratives. This research underscores the importance of healing through reconnection with kinship, spirituality, cultural heritage, and community, drawing on the works of Archibald (2008), Deloria (2003), Duran & Duran (1995), and Methot (2019), A prominent and enduring finding across all interviews conducted in this study relates to the early formative influences of childhood trauma. Each participant articulated an upbringing marked by domestic violence, emotional instability, parental absence, sexual harm, or caregiving environments where the sense of protection was unstable and inconsistent.

Red Bird's narrative illustrates the complexities of abandonment fears, feelings of sadness and depression, and later challenges such as alcohol use. These issues can be contextualized within the broader framework of intergenerational trauma, family mental health struggles, and the colonial disruptions that reverberate across generations (Duran & Duran, 1995; Evans-Campbell, 2008; Hartmann & Gone, 2014). The insights gained from Red Bird's interview significantly deepen our understanding of the interplay between intergenerational trauma and maternal mental health, particularly in relation to early attachment patterns. Red Bird poignantly recalls her mother's absence following a battle with postpartum psychosis, an experience that

carries profound emotional weight. As an infant, she was unable to process this event; however, its lingering effects shaped her emotional landscape. Through subsequent therapeutic engagement, Red Bird recognized that her attachment to her mother became intertwined with a persistent fear, specifically, the fear of her mother's potential re-disappearance. This revelation is a crucial finding in my chapter, emphasizing how trauma can manifest not only through direct acts of violence but also through absence, interruption, and emotional instability.

In LaDean's narrative, a distinct emotional texture emerges, reflecting patterns of conflict and reconciliation within her family dynamics. She recounts experiences of frequent arguments between her parents, alongside her mother's exposure to domestic violence and her father's struggles with alcohol use. A notable aspect of her story is the cyclical nature of separation and remarriage in which her parent's part and reunite three times, creating a familial rhythm marked by disruption and return. This repetition is significant as it instills in children an anticipation of instability, even amidst expressions of love. Analysis of the interviews reveals this observation as a substantial research finding. Children raised in environments marked by recurring conflict and alcohol misuse often internalize a heightened sense of vigilance, adjusting to a reality where volatility is perceived as an ordinary aspect of family life. LaDean's account serves to illustrate the profound impact of alcohol on the emotional architecture of home life, highlighting how silence can function as a coping strategy and how pain becomes ingrained in the body as an expectation (Anda et al., 2006; Marsh et al., 2015; Methot, 2019).

Floralena's narrative illustrates the profound impact of kinship caregiving on her sense of safety, identity, and belonging throughout her life. The care she received from her grandparents not only offered protection and stability but also laid the foundation for a reciprocal relationship, as evidenced by her later decision to care for them. This cyclical nature of caregiving

underscores the link between healing and relational responsibility. Floralena’s narrative also reveals how exposure to alcohol and violence was normalized during her childhood, illustrating a context in which repeated conflict was internalized as an ordinary aspect of family life. Her story highlights a troubling reality: children in homes affected by addiction frequently assume caregiving roles prematurely, bearing emotional burdens and responsibilities that significantly influence their development and survival.

In Nonie’s narrative, memories emerged in fragmented forms - a sweater imbued with her mother’s scent, a grandmother’s house that felt cold rather than comforting, a father returning home intoxicated and aggressive, experiences of sexual abuse, and the harsh discipline imposed by relatives. These recollections reveal more than just painful episodes; they illustrate how trauma infiltrated the intimate spaces of family life, significantly reshaping her perceptions of love, safety, and belonging. Nonie's account corroborates the finding that early harm often manifests as embodied knowledge, entangled within the nervous system long before it can be articulated in coherent language (Duran, 2006; Methot, 2019). This understanding emphasizes the profound impact of early traumatic experiences on individuals, as they navigate their identities and relationships in adulthood. Overall, this study highlights the critical link between early adverse experiences and their lasting effects on emotional and psychological well-being.

Collectively, these narratives reinforce the study's central assertion that healing arises through reconnection. The interplay of memory, kinship, and narrative serves not only to restore a sense of belonging but also to facilitate recovery from adverse experiences.

A significant finding gleaned from these narratives is the normalization of alcohol consumption during childhood and adolescence. Participants described their experiences with alcohol as integral to family life, embedded within the dynamics of home, adult relationships,

conflicts, fears, and social interactions. For instance, LaDean's encounters with drinking began at the age of fourteen, influenced by peer dynamics that emphasized a desire for belonging and a fear of exclusion. Her assertion, “Everybody else was doing it,” transcends mere reminiscence of youthful experimentation; it underscores the way alcohol is intertwined with group acceptance and the formation of adolescent identity. This finding is critical as it indicates that early alcohol use did not develop in isolation. Rather, it emerged from childhood environments wherein alcohol was already a familiar presence and from social contexts where drinking facilitated a sense of belonging. Throughout the interviews, this normalization of early alcohol use appeared as one of the most profound pathways through which these women integrated alcohol into their lives (Anda et al., 2006; Spillane et al., 2023; Venner et al., 2021).

A second noteworthy finding pertains to the interplay between trauma, emotional regulation, and substance use. In numerous interviews, participants described their use of alcohol and other substances as responses to unresolved emotions such as fear, grief, loneliness, and psychic distress. Nonie exemplifies this connection with striking clarity; her later substance use can be understood as a maladaptive strategy for managing emotions that were profoundly disrupted during childhood by experiences of grief, violence, and maternal absence. This insight is pivotal for my research, as it reframes addiction not as a moral failing but as a survival mechanism. It allows us to approach these women’s narratives with increased compassion and a deeper understanding of their historical and relational contexts. When individuals have endured prolonged hypervigilance, fear, or unprocessed grief, substances can serve as a temporary means to mitigate emotional pain that has never been safely addressed. This finding resonates with Indigenous trauma scholarship, which situates substance use within a framework of cumulative

wounding rather than as a matter of isolated individual choice (Duran & Duran, 1995; Methot, 2019).

A related finding is that a sense of belonging is central to both addiction and recovery. Each participant sought acceptance, safety, or emotional refuge, often turning to substances when these connections felt fragile. Conversely, healing commenced when they found forms of belonging that revitalized rather than depleted them. For instance, Nonie's recovery involved connecting with the spirits of her mother and grandmothers during withdrawal, while LaDean drew strength from prayer, cultural teachings, and her burgeoning role as an Elder. Similarly, Red Bird emphasized the importance of understanding her fears and tracing her sadness through family history, which fostered self-compassion rather than blame. Floralena's healing unfolded through the restoration of kinship itself caring for her aging grandfather in the same home where her childhood took shape, stepping into a matriarchal role after her mother's death, and building community through the Addicts to Athletes program in the Uintah Basin alongside her husband. For her, belonging was regenerated through daily acts of care, caretaking, and collective commitment to survival. Collectively, these stories demonstrate that recovery is not achieved solely through abstinence; it is facilitated by relationships, meaning-making, and the reintegration of kinship as a vital source of support.

These narratives also indicate that intimate partner violence is often intricately linked to addiction among women, as exemplified by Nonie's experience. She recounted incidents of severe physical abuse, including broken bones and her children fleeing to seek help, revealing that her dependence on drugs contributed to her decision to remain in an abusive relationship. This underscores a significant finding that addiction can exacerbate entrapment in violent relationships, while violence can heighten substance dependence. For Indigenous women, the

interplay of addiction and interpersonal violence is compounded by historical trauma, disrupted kinship networks, and inadequate access to culturally appropriate support, highlighting the need for integrated healing approaches that address trauma, substance use, and violence collectively.

This study also highlights critical findings regarding land and cultural continuity, drawing on the poignant accounts of individuals such as Red Bird. Her narrative exemplifies the profound spiritual conflict surrounding land use, development, and the sanctity of place. It illustrates how emotional distress can be interpreted as a form of spatial mourning, indicating that experiences of depression and substance use may be deeply intertwined with feelings of displacement, desecration, and estrangement from one’s ancestral land.

LaDean's account further enriches this analysis through her commitment to language revitalization and cultural education. By creating songs, games, and educational videos for children in her Indigenous language, she reframes recovery as an act of cultural perpetuation. Floralena extends this understanding through a different but equally grounded practice. She carries forward her grandparents' legacy through daily caretaking, teaching her children and community what it means to show up for one another across generations. Where LaDean transmits culture through language, Floralena transmits it through relational labor—through feeding, protecting, staying close, and refusing to let kinship dissolve under the weight of accumulated harm. These narratives collectively emphasize that healing manifests through active engagement in lived cultural practices. Healing flourishes when individuals reconnect with their language, engage in prayer, impart knowledge, fulfill their daily responsibilities, and sustain the relational networks that hold community together. This framework is essential to this research because it situates the process of healing within the context of Indigenous continuity and emphasizes the necessity of cultural traditions and practices rather than reliance on Western

treatment approaches alone (Deloria, 2003; Gone, 2009; Kirmayer et al., 2011; Rowan et al., 2014).

This study also highlights the intricate relationship between memory and storytelling. Participants often recounted memories through fragmented recollections, vivid imagery, pauses, physical reactions, and returns to specific moments in their lives. This pattern is crucial, as it demonstrates that traumatic memories do not follow linear pathways. Consequently, storytelling transcends mere recollection; it serves as a vital method for reconstructing experiences that trauma has fragmented. For instance, in Nonie's interview, memory was conveyed through sensory details and poignant fragments, illustrating how trauma can shape recollection. Red Bird's narrative emerged through reflective pauses, with insights gained during therapy contributing to a deeper understanding of her experiences. LaDean's account broadened the scope of memory from early family violence to encompass a comprehensive narrative of recovery, education, and Elderhood. Floralena's relationship to memory operated differently still. Her recollections moved between rupture and return from the chaos of her mother's addiction-filled household to the sheltered warmth of her grandparents' home, from the violence she witnessed as a child to the matriarchal strength she claimed as an adult. Memory for Floralena was less about recovering what was lost and more about reweaving what had always been present beneath the disruption: the continuity of kinship, the responsibility of care, and the knowledge that survival is a practice passed from one generation to the next. Collectively, these interviews affirm a foundational principle of Indigenous Storywork that story is a vessel for knowledge, capable of holding pain with a sense of responsibility, fostering understanding by contextualizing memory, and allowing it to be witnessed, interpreted, and ultimately transformed. (Archibald, 2008; Methot, 2019; Smith, 2012).

These narratives also acknowledge the coexistence of harm and love within family memory. Participants revealed a nuanced understanding of family dynamics, rejecting the notion of a singular narrative of pain. Floralena, for instance, recalled the care she received from her grandparents while simultaneously acknowledging the presence of violence and alcoholism in her home. Similarly, LaDean spoke affectionately about her father's story and the initial meeting of her parents in Tacoma, even as she recounted the violence that characterized her childhood. This complexity is of profound importance to the current study, as it illustrates that Indigenous family narratives often encompass contradictions, sorrow, affection, humor, and trauma simultaneously.

Participants also demonstrated resilience as a form of relational accountability. Each woman exemplified how survival translates into a form of giving back to the community. For instance, LaDean’s dedication as a language teacher and respected Elder illustrates how the process of healing evolves into both service and cultural leadership. Similarly, Nonie’s journey of recovery and her act of truth-telling illuminate the immense strength required to confront and articulate that which was previously shrouded in shame and fear. Red Bird's insightful identification of intergenerational trauma represents a unique form of leadership characterized by honesty, reflection, and an earnest effort to trace the lineage of pain within family histories. This narrative contributes to our understanding that resilience is not confined to polished tales of triumph; rather, it manifests in daily practices such as prayer, cultural work, caregiving, and the courageous act of truth-telling.

The decision to remain accountable to future generations is also a prominent theme in this study. The transition from personal suffering to communal service stands out as one of the most compelling findings. These women's stories collectively affirm that healing is enriched when it

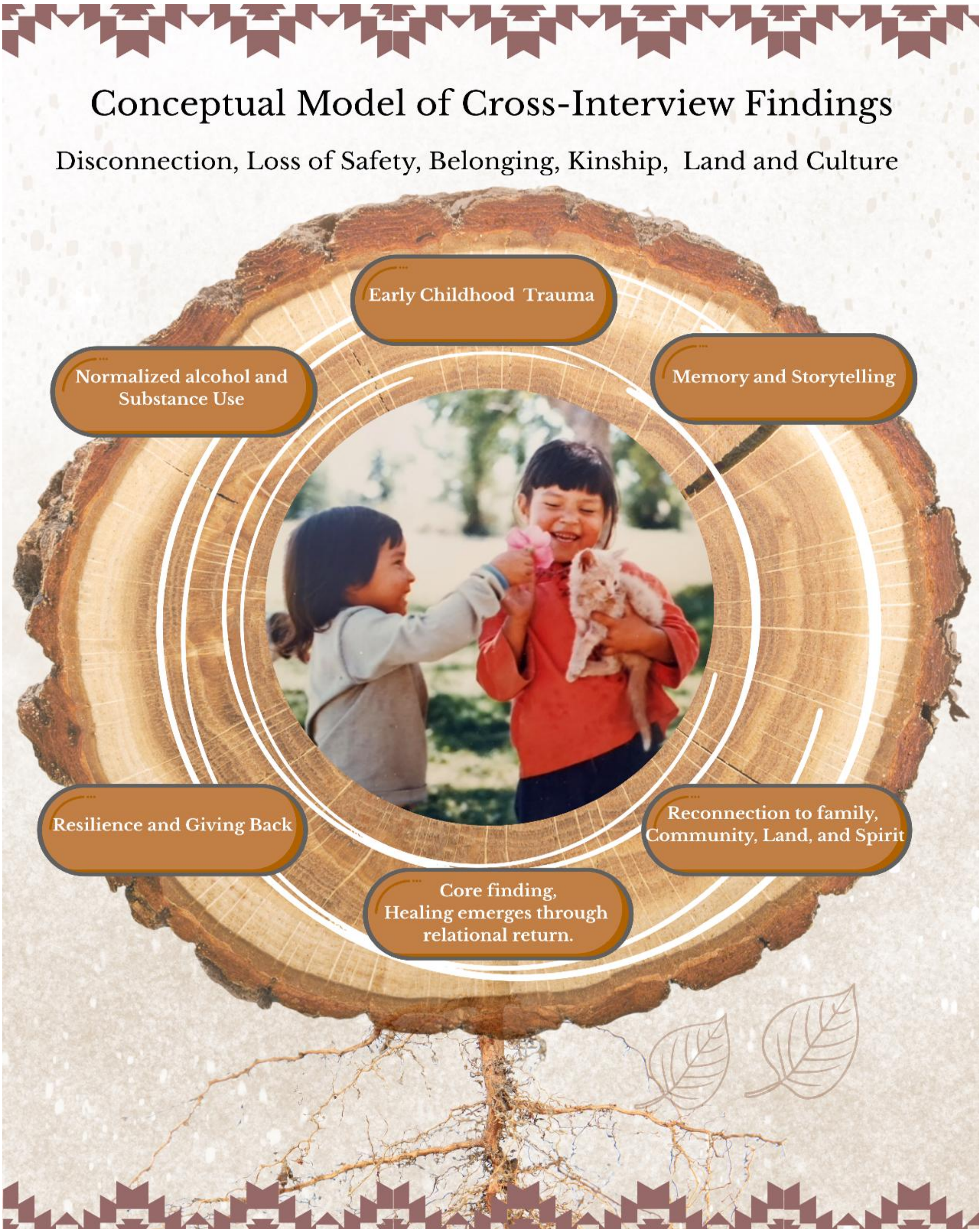
actively contributes to the well-being of family, children, language, land, and community (Gone, 2013; Kirmayer et al., 2011; Linklater, 2014). This finding underscores the interconnectedness of personal and communal narratives, demonstrating that healing is a collective journey rooted in relational bonds and cultural responsibilities.

The findings presented in this chapter provide a nuanced understanding of the intricate relationships between alcohol and substance use among Indigenous women and their historical and contemporary traumas. The qualitative interviews conducted during this study reveal that these issues are intricately tied to a myriad of factors, including early trauma, domestic violence, parental absence, emotional distress, intergenerational grief, normalized exposure to alcohol consumption, and disrupted experiences of safety and belonging.

Participants' narratives also underscore that pathways to healing are facilitated through storytelling, memory reclamation, prayer, and reconnections to family, culture, language, and land. These elements form the foundation for restoring relational accountability within communities. A critical insight derived from the perspectives of these women is that addiction can be conceptualized as a manifestation of disconnection—rooted in fractured kinship ties, embodied trauma, and the cumulative losses experienced across generations. Conversely, healing emerges through recommitment to relationships and narratives that convey truth, through recollection of fragmented memories, and through cultural continuity that enables communities to move forward. This conceptual framework embodies the essence of the findings discussed in Chapter 4. Figure 18 synthesizes patterns shared across the four interviews. This model shows how early childhood trauma and normalized alcohol and substance use contributed to experiences of disconnection, while memory, storytelling, reconnection to family and land, and communal responsibility supported healing and recovery.

Figure 18

Conceptual Model of Cross- Interview Findings on Addiction



Indigenous Storywork served as a methodological approach to honor the narratives of the four women who participated in this study, with both care and rigor, illustrating that pathways to recovery exist within relationships, collective responsibility, and the sacred practice of communal remembrance (Archibald, 2008; Deloria, 2003; Duran & Duran, 1995; Methot, 2019). Through this lens, this research not only contributes to a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of Indigenous women but also emphasizes the importance of relational and cultural contexts in addressing substance use and fostering healing.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Introduction

This chapter returns to the roots of my study. It gathers what has been planted across the preceding chapters, the problem, the purpose, the questions, the methodology, and the stories, and holds them together in the spirit of Indigenous Storywork (Archibald, 2008), which has guided this study. It does so with the same relational accountability that shaped how this work began - with honesty about where this inquiry came from, what it carries, and what it asks of those who receive it (Archibald, 2008; Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008).

I begin this chapter as I began this dissertation from the land, from memory, and from the persistence of love across loss. The Cottonwood trees that lined the streets of my childhood in the Uintah Basin still stand in my memory as they stood then, as witnesses, as teachers, as relatives holding the seasons of our lives within their rings. My father cut their branches for firewood. I stood in their shade with my sisters and dreamed of a life untouched by the chaos that alcohol brought through our door. Decades later, driving home on the back roads and crossing Red Bridge, I saw those same trees adorned in autumn gold and thought immediately of my father and then of my brother, who at 48 continues to struggle with alcohol and substance use disorder, and for whose well-being I carry a worry that shaped each page of this study. These memories are the epistemological ground of this work. As Momaday (1968) writes, some of my mother's memories have become my own; that is the real burden of the blood (p. 89). That inheritance of memory, grief, and love has driven this inquiry from its first question to its final finding.

The Dream

As a grown woman, I often have recurring dreams of my younger sister and me riding our bicycles beneath the cool shade of the towering Cottonwood trees in our hometown. These tender memories of my childhood transport me to a small, safe town where the land tells stories from a time long past. In this place, a checkerboard pattern of land ownership divided the community, reflecting a delicate balance between the Ute Indian Tribe and the residents of Duchesne County, a legacy shaped by the 1905 Dawes Act.

Once, at a pivotal moment in our lives, there was "Erma's," a quaint grocery store overflowing with the joys of childhood. Nearby, on Highway 40, stood "Budd's," a modest gas station. We had been warned never to cross the road to get to Bud's, but we did it all the time. However, time, that unyielding force, has turned those vivid memories into shadows of what once was. Now, only the old post office remains, standing as a reminder of the past. Its weathered facade silently witnesses the laughter and conversations that once filled the air.

In my dream, I am transported back to the golden days of my youth, when my heart soared with the thrill of adventure. I vividly recall giving my younger sister a ride on my bike, pedaling furiously while skillfully dodging the sidewalk's bumps and cracks. Our wheels spun like dreams, weaving through the familiar streets that cradled our carefree spirits. Each ride became a journey into uncharted wonder, a glide of memories that lingered like fleeting shadows cast by the towering Cottonwood trees, standing as silent sentinels. We often sought refuge beneath their expansive branches, catching our breath in the gentle rustle of leaves, fully enveloped in the essence of summer, a testament to the innocence we embraced with open hearts. As I reflect on those ephemeral moments, they morph into haunting echoes of a time when life felt simple and boundless. The stories of our small town drift through the whispers of the wind,

with each breeze awakening the joy I once cherished, and the indelible bonds forever intertwined with that beloved place. These memories, vivid and alive, resonate within me, serving as a bittersweet reminder of the childhood dreams that once illuminated my path. Yet, within these roots of nostalgia lies a recurring dream that unveils a suppressed memory, possibly tied to a traumatic experience from my childhood.

In my dream, I catch a glimpse of a small white building in the blurry distance. Its paint is chipped, and metal bars adorn the windows, making it a relic of the past, the Myton City Jail. I often wonder whether my father was ever held there; the thought lingers, and I sometimes feel a sense of déjà vu as I walk past this old structure.

I imagine that this jail served as a place where locals and tribal members were detained for minor offenses, like public intoxication or the fights that occasionally broke out outside the Three-Legged Dog Saloon (see Figure 20). This local pub, named after its owner's three-legged German shepherd, adds to the memory's vividness. The building stands as a reminder of a different time, evoking a mix of nostalgia and curiosity about those who may have crossed its threshold.

In these vivid memories, I see a dog sitting patiently in front of the bar, greeting customers with a wagging tail. As we ride our bikes on those quiet weekend mornings, the dog watches us with a warmth that feels almost nostalgic. This dream, laced with fragments of my past, seems to pull back the curtain on my childhood, a time marked by the shadows of alcoholism in my home. Each glimpse into this memory offers me a deeper understanding of my experiences growing up, yet it's like piecing together a jigsaw puzzle where some pieces are still missing.

As I rode my bike through the winding streets, a building loomed ahead, its silhouette both familiar and haunting. The closer we got, the more elusive its identity became, as if hidden among forgotten memories. My sister sat behind me, clutching my T-shirt tightly, her distress evident. Her eyes shimmered with unshed tears, and her voice trembled softly, revealing an emotional struggle weighing heavily on her. Despite the heavy feeling in the air, we kept going, weaving through the narrow alleys that led us deeper into this unsettling place.

A heavy sadness settled over me as we neared the Old Myton City Jail (see Figure 19). It loomed before us, a somber monument that echoed both sorrow and remnants of happier times. I found myself staring through the cold, iron bars, and then—there it was—a hand reaching out from the shadows. My father's hand. It looked so pale and worn, a testament to the battles he'd faced throughout his life.

I couldn't help but notice those familiar, calloused fingers. The crooked index finger... I knew it well. It told stories of hard work and resilience. In that moment, a flicker of warmth stirred inside me, and I could almost hear his voice, clear and comforting, drawing me in. "Girls, it's good to see you. I'll be back home soon."

His words were tinged with a bittersweet longing, a promise wrapped in hope. Yet, just like that, his voice began to fade, merging into the background, becoming a blur, like a fleeting dream I wasn't quite ready to let go of.

In the depths of my dream, tears welled in my eyes as I grasped his hand, the memories flooding back with painful clarity. I could almost feel the ghost of the father I once cherished, overshadowed now by the tragic grip of alcoholism that had imprisoned him in both body and spirit. As his smile faded into the recesses of my dream, I found myself engulfed by a deep yearning for a connection that had withered over time, leaving only echoes of what once was.

In the quiet space of reflection, I grappled with the question of belonging, once so integral to my identity, now slipping through my fingers like sand. The landscape around me, once imbued with a sense of home, became a maze of contemplation and loss. In that swirling sea of memories and emotions, I felt adrift, haunted by the shadows of my childhood trauma and the indelible marks it left upon my heart and the standing tree of the Cottonwood.

Figure 19

Old Myton City Jail

Note. Photo from Valentina R. Sireech, 2024

Figure 20

Three-Legged Dog Saloon, Myton, Utah

Note. Photo from Valentia R. Sireech, 2024

Where the Cottonwood First Took Root

During the first part of my doctoral program, I traveled regularly to Auburn, Washington, seeking solace in my room at the Holiday Inn on weekends. I recall those Saturday nights vividly, how solitude enveloped me after class, my mind already preoccupied with the next assignment. In those moments, the distance from my family and the familiar landscapes of Utah, a place that shaped my earliest understandings of love, loss, grief, and belonging, felt profound and immeasurable. The work ahead loomed, immense and daunting. As I sat at that unfamiliar

desk, I grappled with a swirl of emotions: anxiety intermingled with excitement, uncertainty braided with determination. The weight of my studies pressed against my chest, a tangible reminder of their significance. In the stillness of that room, a question arose within me, one that would come to define the entire arc of this work: *What does it mean to write a dissertation grounded in lived experiences, family memories, and the histories that course through our very bodies and narratives?*

I pondered how best to approach this study, striving to write honestly and with depth about addiction and the care intertwined with it. What would that exploration reveal? How could I honor the truth and respect the complexities of a subject that permeates our communities so deeply? Addiction lives within the people we cherish. It moves through our homes, lingers in silences, echoes within the grief that shadows us, and manifests in the long legacies of historical trauma that our communities continue to carry (Gutiérrez, 2024; Kirmayer et al., 2009)

Those who grapple with addiction remain our relatives, tied to us through kinship, responsibility, and love. It became imperative to me that my study reflect this understanding, capturing the essence of our shared humanity and the connections that bind us, even in the face of adversity. I hoped this work would illuminate the challenges we face and reveal the resilience and compassion that persist within our communities, even when those qualities are tested by circumstances that seem unbearable.

That night, as I reflected on my brother, I was acutely aware of the relentless currents of addiction that continue to shape his existence. I felt the weight of responsibility that accompanies writing about a suffering that remains unfinished, a pain that lives in the present tense. I wanted to honor his life and portray him in a way that transcends his struggles. I wanted this study to illuminate how families persist in loving those caught in the throes of active substance use,

showcasing how care endures amid worry, anger, fatigue, heartbreak, and the flicker of hope that refuses to be extinguished.

I also thought of my older sister (see Figure 21), who had courageously shared her own truths about her journey toward sobriety. As I listened to her during our interviews, I found myself mourning the child she once was, a nine-year-old girl yearning for safety in a world that had already demanded far too much of her. Her story, like the narratives woven throughout this study, laid bare how early trauma, violence, dislocation, and silence frequently become the very soil from which addiction emerges. However, within her telling, I also discovered themes of survival, courage, relational strength, and the difficult but sacred path toward healing.

Figure 21

Siblings in Elementary School, Circa 1970s

Note. Photos from Valentina R. Sireech, 2026

These narratives are deeply rooted in a reality that resonates on a personal level. They capture the haunting complexity of love and resilience within families grappling with the grips of addiction. As I embark on this exploration, I find myself profoundly moved by the struggles

endured and the indelible bonds that persist amidst the chaos. These connections, often forged in the crucible of hardship, reveal a truth that is as beautiful as it is heart-wrenching - love can withstand the greatest trials. This study serves as a testament to the strength of these relationships, which, I believe, are central to any genuine understanding of recovery and care. It is through these intimate stories that we can truly grasp the essence of healing and the relentless pursuit of hope.

When the Leaves Stirred Without Wind

As I sat in that solemn hotel room, reality began to shift around me. A faint scent of cigarette smoke crept into the air, lingering like a whisper, though no one was present to exhale it. My pen moved ever so slightly on the desk, a minor movement that would have escaped notice were I not attuned to it. I closed my eyes, and tears welled up unbidden, flowing down my cheeks. In that intimate moment, I felt my father's presence envelop me. He was there, transcending the distance from my hometown of Myton, far from the sacred grounds where our family narratives first began. In the Ancestral landscapes of the Pacific Northwest Nations, he visited me as a guide. His presence did not unsettle me; instead, it imbued me with steadiness and comfort. It felt as though my spirit was offering gentle reassurances, yet beneath that comforting layer lay a compelling call to action.

During those moments of quiet reflection, I came to understand that this dissertation is rooted in my family's collective memory and is deeply intertwined with themes of loss, grief, and a profound connection to the spiritual realm. This understanding influenced how I conclude this chapter and has guided my exploration of pathways to healing. By integrating Indigenous Storywork with lived experiences, I aim to contribute to addiction research in a meaningful way, blending methodology and theory to create a more comprehensive and humanizing approach.

What the Roots[2] Remember

At the beginning of this dissertation, I mentioned my father's childhood, but I did not provide specific locations or detailed context. This omission may have appeared as an oversight, yet it serves as an important foundation for this study. Through the interpretations gathered from all participants, it became evident that childhood experiences played a crucial role in shaping their lives. Many indicated that it was during their formative years that trauma, particularly intergenerational trauma, took root and began to shape the trajectories they would follow. This realization led me to delve deeper into my father's childhood experiences, enabling me to provide essential context that illustrates how his upbringing resonates with the participants' stories throughout this study. By drawing this connection, we enrich our understanding of his narrative and highlight the far-reaching effects of early trauma on individuals and the communities to which they belong.

My father was born on April 19, 1945, in Fort Duchesne, Utah, a place steeped in its own social and historical complexities that would shape his life. My grandmother gave birth to him out of wedlock; his father was not a member of the Ute tribe. This circumstance placed him at the intersection of multiple identities during a time when terms like *"mixed-blood"* and *"half-breed"* were commonly used to label children of such unions. These labels carried a heavy burden of shame, exclusion, and a profound sense of not belonging (Metcalf, 2002, p. 57). From the very beginning, my father bore the weight of society's prejudices, which would have lasting implications for his identity and his connections to family and community.

As he grew up, the difficulties he faced intensified. Family stories recount episodes of harsh discipline, physical abuse, and neglect, often leaving him to seek refuge in the barn at

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[2] See Figures 22, 23, and 24.

night. These painful memories serve as significant building blocks for the emotional and analytical foundation of this dissertation. They highlight how early trauma can infiltrate family life, shaping dynamics and responses across generations in profound and often invisible ways.

This understanding of my father's experiences prompted me to explore the roots of addiction within families and communities already burdened by historical trauma. I sought to investigate the complex interactions and dynamics that emerge for those who live with such inherited legacies. By examining personal narratives alongside collective experiences, I sought to shed light on the intricate connections between individual trauma and broader societal forces, ultimately contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of how early childhood experiences shape later-life outcomes (Durie, 2004; Gone, 2011).

This study has deepened my understanding of how my father's struggles with addiction are inseparable from the historical traumas experienced by our family and community. By analyzing personal narratives alongside wider collective experiences, my findings reveal strong connections between individual trauma and systemic societal issues, emphasizing the significant impact early childhood experiences can have on the arc of a human life (Evans-Campbell, 2008). This research underscores the need to address these intertwined traumas to promote genuine healing and support meaningful recovery.

Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart (2003) describes the Historical Trauma Response as: "cumulative emotional and psychological wounding" (p. 7). In my father's life, this wounding was an embodied reality. He was a boy banished to a barn, a child carrying feelings of exclusion tied to his name, experiencing violence in his own home. His spirit was burdened by a colonial system designed to fracture connections and diminish relational life. However, even within those constrained circumstances, my father's intelligence shone through. His gentleness endured. He

found solace in the healing presence of horses. In that connection, I see something far deeper than comfort; I see an Indigenous way of relating, an effort to embrace life through the more-than-human world, a means of survival through kinship when human care faltered.

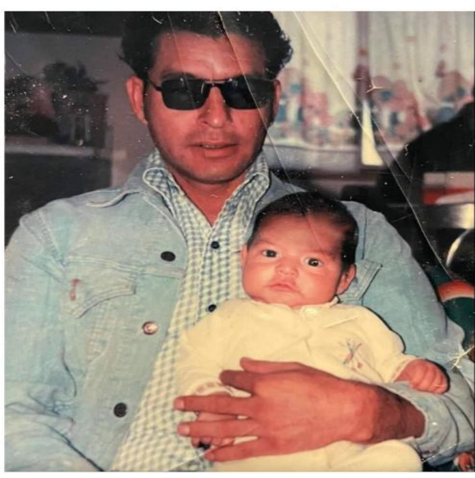
Figure 22

My Father as a Young Boy and as a Teenager

Note. Photo from Valentina R. Sireech, 2026

Figure 23

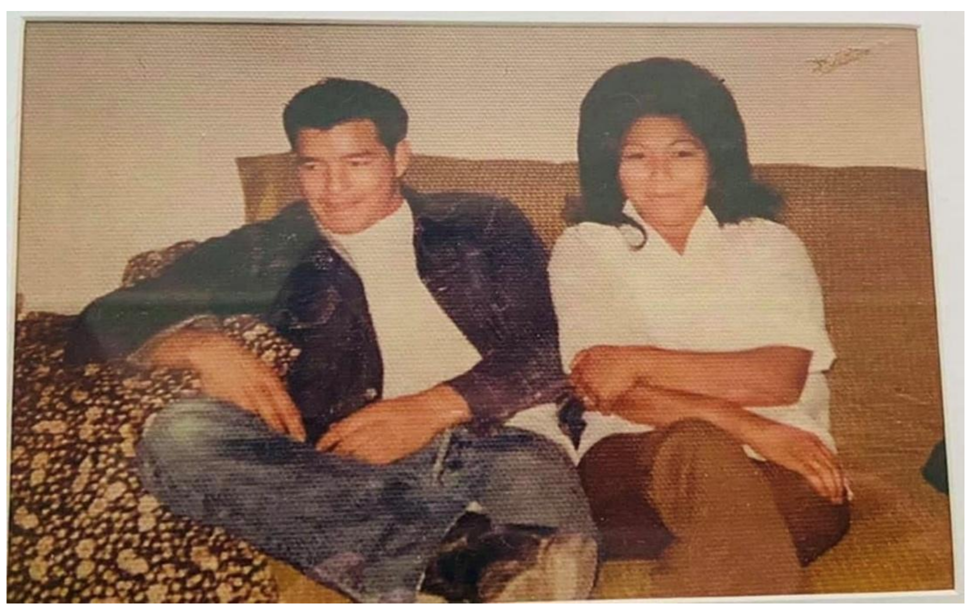
Dad & Baby Brother, Circa 1976



Note. Photo from Valentina R. Sireech, 2026

Figure 24

My Father and Mother, Circa 1970s



Restatement of the Problem Addressed in this Study

The problem this study addressed is both structural and intimate. Across the United States, American Indian and Alaska Native communities experience the highest rates of drug overdose mortality and substance-related emergency department visits in the nation (Barnes et al., 2005; Spencer et al., 2023). Suicide rates among Indigenous people remain more than twice the national average, while the chronic underfunding of the Indian Health Service continues to restrict access to sustained and culturally grounded care (Spencer et al., 2023). Rural isolation, economic hardship, and limited behavioral health infrastructure reinforce cycles of harm within Tribal communities (Smye et al., 2023). These conditions are the visible surface of a far deeper wound.

The roots of this crisis reach into a colonial history that deliberately fractured Indigenous systems of relationship, spiritual continuity, and collective well-being. Forced removal, assimilation policies, and systemic racism reshaped relationships to land, language, and kinship,

leaving enduring wounds carried across generations (Sherman et al., 2025). Duran (2006) describes colonial violence as an initiating wound that becomes internalized and self-perpetuating within the spirit. Brave Heart (1998), Brave Heart et al. (2011), and Weiss et al. (2023) document how historical trauma transmits through bodies and families as living grief, carried forward through the silence, endurance, and emotional restraint that generations have learned as survival rather than choice. I witnessed the legacy of my father, shaped by unspoken wounds that began long before his struggle with alcohol. His story, filled with pain, was passed down to me through my mother's thoughtful recounting, long after he had departed from this world.

The problem deepens when we examine how existing systems respond to this crisis. State and local responses in Utah and surrounding regions have relied on deficit-based data, fragmented services, and externally imposed frameworks that fail to address the relational, cultural, historical, and spiritual dimensions of addiction within Indigenous lives (Duran & Firehammer, 2017; Johnson-Jennings et al., 2023; Linklater, 2014). Conventional treatment models define substance use as moral failure, behavioral defect, or biological disease while severing distress from land, culture, and collective memory (Chavarria, 2017; Kirmayer et al., 2011). As Echo-Hawk (2017) argues, when Indigenous people are made invisible in data and policy, they no longer exist as full human beings within systems that were never designed to see them whole. The gap between what those systems offer and what Indigenous people actually need to heal relationships, stories, land, ceremony, and cultural continuity is the central problem this dissertation sets out to address.

I understand this problem firsthand. I grew up in a household where addiction was woven into the fabric of daily existence, present in my father's tenderness and his darkness, in the

silence that followed his drinking, in the way grief and love occupied the same space without resolution. As a Substance Use Disorder Counselor serving the Ute Indian Tribe, I have watched that same pattern repeat across the lives of those I serve - emotions that feel larger than a single lifetime, grief surfacing without a clear source, shame framing addiction as personal failure while disconnecting it from history. My brother's struggle has never permitted me to approach this problem from a distance. In the fall of 2024, he called on a gray Saturday afternoon, his voice thin and threaded with pain, needing to reach the emergency room. I drove him there, sat beside him, counted his uneven breaths, and listened as a nurse acknowledged plainly that the facility remained unequipped for medically supervised detox. That hospital room made the structural problem visible at the scale of one man's body, one family's history, and one community's accumulated harm.

Restatement of the Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to understand addiction and healing within Indigenous contexts through the lived experiences, memories, and stories of Indigenous people. This study centered Indigenous epistemologies as the foundation for meaning-making and knowledge generation. It approached addiction as a relational, historical, cultural, and spiritual condition shaped by colonial disruption, intergenerational trauma, and systemic inequity rather than locating substance use within individual pathology (Brave Heart, 2003; Corntassel, 2021; Gone et al., 2019; Linklater, 2014). The study positioned Indigenous Storywork (Archibald, 2008) and visual art narrative (Campt, 2017) as both its methodology and its theoretical framework, affirming that storytelling, memory, dream, and creative expression are legitimate and authoritative sources of knowledge (Absolon, 2022; Cajete, 2000; Kovach, 2009; Smith, 2021).

This study sought to reframe the dominant narrative of addiction by centering story, memory, and relational accountability as instruments of knowledge production and healing. It did so by drawing on the accounts of Indigenous participants who navigated addiction, recovery, survival, and the restoration of kinship and by drawing equally on my own story, which has been present in every chapter of this work. My life at the intersection of personal experience, clinical practice, artistic practice, and scholarly inquiry defines how this study was conceived and carried forward. The land I grew up on, the Cottonwood trees I watched across decades, the firewood days with my father at Red Bridge, the dreams in which he appears to me as a young man, powerful and free, these are the materials from which this study's purpose was built. As Wilson (2008) teaches, relational accountability forms the foundation of Indigenous research, requiring reciprocity, care, and respect in all stages of inquiry, including the stage at which a researcher must be honest about why this work matters to my personally and what I hope it might return to the community that made it possible.

A central goal of this research was to document how addiction and recovery unfold across the course of Indigenous lives, tracing the ways in which substance use emerges within broader social, cultural, and historical contexts shaped by kinship disruption, intergenerational trauma, and disconnection from land and ceremony (Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998; Evans-Campbell, 2008). Memory functioned throughout this study as a bridge between personal experience and collective history, enabling participants and the researcher alike to reconnect with themselves through the practice of remembrance (Battiste, 2001; Friedland & Napoleon, 2015; Hampton, 1995). Equally central was the exploration of healing as a land-based and ceremonial process, grounded in Indigenous epistemologies that understand land as a living archive of spirit, teaching, and ancestral presence (Cajete, 2000; Deloria, 1999; Kimmerer, 2013; Silko, 2006).

Visual art narrative, including beadwork, photography, oil painting, and digital collage, participates in this study as a primary form of knowledge production rather than as supplemental illustration, affirming what Motta-Ochoa et al. (2024) document as the growing evidence base for art-based approaches in Indigenous healing contexts.

Research Questions

The overarching research question guiding this study asked: How does the integration of Indigenous Storywork with visual art and narrative storytelling open pathways for healing, cultural reclamation, and self-determination among Indigenous individuals navigating recovery from addiction, including those actively engaged in treatment? This question emerged from years of clinical practice, from the stories carried within my own family, and from the recognition that recovery, when confined to Western biomedical frameworks, consistently fails to reach the depth at which healing within Indigenous communities must occur.

Five supporting research questions also directed the inquiry. The first asked: In what ways do stories grounded in land, community, and lived experience reveal addiction as a collective and historical response rather than an isolated personal condition? This question challenges the dominant framing of substance use as individual pathology and positions it instead within the web of colonial disruption, kinship rupture, and intergenerational harm that shapes Indigenous life (Brave Heart, 2003; Duran, 2006; Evans-Campbell, 2008). The second question asked: How do visual storytelling practices such as digital collage, beadwork, and photography express dimensions of healing that extend beyond the limits of spoken or written language? This question arose from my own practice as an artist and from the recognition that some truths, the texture of grief, the presence of an ancestor, the spiritual weight of addiction, refuse to be contained within words alone (Cajete, 2000; Motta-Ochoa et al., 2024; Tuck, 2009).

The third supporting question asked: How do Indigenous methodologies grounded in relational accountability and cultural continuity enrich clinical and educational practices aimed at community wellness? This question connects the epistemological commitments of this study directly to the practical responsibilities of counselors, educators, and researchers working within Indigenous communities (Absolon, 2022; Archibald, 2008; Linklater, 2014; Wilson, 2008). The fourth question asked: How does the relationship with land, understood as a living relative, teacher, and site of memory, create openings for healing from substance and alcohol use that Western treatment models consistently overlook? This question emerged from my walk along the path of my Ute Ancestors in 2023, from the sense I felt beneath my feet that the land holds what displacement took, and from the scholarship of Simpson (2014), Kimmerer (2013), and Redvers (2020), who each documented the healing power of land-based reconnection. The fifth question asked: What stories do Indigenous individuals and families share about addiction, recovery, survival, and healing, and how do these narratives reflect teachings of cultural resilience, ancestral knowledge, and the restoration of kinship? Together, these five questions established the direction of this dissertation and invited a return to story as a living source of knowledge, one that transcends Western frameworks by placing Indigenous voices, family memories, and creative expression at the center of what it means to know and to heal (Kovach, 2009; Smith, 2021).

Overview of the Study

This dissertation is organized into five chapters, each contributing to the larger act of Storywork (Archibald, 2018) that defines both the methodology and the spirit of this inquiry. Chapter 1 introduced the problem and the purpose, situating the study within the personal, communal, and scholarly contexts that gave it life. It established the Cottonwood tree as a

guiding metaphor, draws on my own family history and clinical experience, and outlines the research questions that direct the work. Chapter 2 offers a literature review that compiles scholarship on Indigenous Storywork, land-based knowledge, visual art narrative, intergenerational trauma, and decolonizing methodologies in addiction-related research. It showed how these bodies of knowledge collectively challenge deficit-based approaches and center Indigenous epistemologies as the foundation for understanding and responding to addiction within Indigenous communities (Archibald, 2008; Brave Heart, 2003; Duran, 2006; Kimmerer, 2013; Linklater, 2014; Simpson, 2017).

Chapter 3 outlined the study's methodology, rooted in Indigenous Storywork as both a theoretical framework and research approach. It specified the data sources, including participant interviews, personal narratives and lived experiences, visual art as data, and researcher reflexive materials, and describes the analytical process of Storyweaving used to interpret the data (Archibald, 2008; Robinson, 2020; Wilson, 2008). It discussed positionality, reflexivity, ethical responsibility, and the relational commitments guiding every stage of the research. Chapter 4 presented the findings, placing the voices of Indigenous participants within the broader theoretical and relational context of the study. These narratives revealed themes of childhood trauma, disrupted kinship, intergenerational loss, and the transformative effects of cultural reconnection, spiritual practice, and land-based memory as pathways to healing (Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998; Evans-Campbell, 2008; McCormick, 2000; Methot, 2019; Rowan et al., 2014). This fifth chapter shifts to a discussion of the implications, limitations, and future directions for scholarship, practice, and community-centered inquiry.

What connects each chapter is the understanding that this study arose from a living obligation. My father's life and death, my brother's ongoing struggle, my mother's beadwork and

her prayers at the kitchen table, the Cottonwood trees standing at Red Bridge across all the seasons of my memory, these are the roots beneath this work. Archibald (2008) teaches that stories live as family, that they help us understand who we are and where we come from, that they lead us home when the world forgets how to see us. This dissertation was written in that spirit. It carries the hope that naming what has been silenced, honoring what has been carried, and returning story to the communities from which it came can open a door, a root channel, a conversation long deferred that allows healing.

Summary of Findings

The findings of this study emerged through what I call Storyweaving, an analytical process grounded in the Seven Principles of Indigenous Storywork (Archibald, 2008): respect, responsibility, reverence, reciprocity, holism, interrelatedness, and synergy. These principles shaped every dimension of how I listened, interpreted, and carried the accounts that participants trusted me with. They also shaped how I positioned my own stories alongside theirs, understanding that in Indigenous inquiry, the researcher's life, memory, and dreaming are sources of knowledge rather than sources of bias to be bracketed away (Absolon, 2022; Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008). What follows is a concise synthesis of the principal findings across Chapter 4, organized around the recurring patterns that surfaced across individual accounts and connected to the broader scholarly literature on Indigenous healing, historical trauma, and recovery.

This study gathered the stories of four Indigenous women, one Indigenous man, who were either in recovery or actively navigating addiction at the time of the interviews, and my own story as a Northern Ute woman. Conducted between October and November 2025, these conversations created what Archibald (2008) describes as a space of living knowledge, where stories become pedagogical rather than merely testimonial. I approached each interview with the

understanding that what participants shared with me arose from relationships built on trust and relational accountability, and that my responsibility extended far beyond the transcript to the communities, ancestors, and futures their stories carry (Pere, 1994; Smith, 2021). My own experience as a Northern Ute woman, as a Substance Use Disorder Counselor serving the Ute Indian Tribe, and as a family member who has lived with addiction across generations was present in each interview room. I did not arrive as a neutral observer. I arrived as a relative.

Finding One: Addiction as Relational Rupture, Not Personal Failure

The most consistent and foundational finding across all participant accounts is that addiction emerged from conditions of disconnection rather than from individual moral failure or biological deficiency. This pattern appeared across every narrative in the study, and it mirrors the trajectory of my own family's history with substance use. My father's alcohol use, which shaped the emotional landscape of my childhood, was inseparable from the wounds he carried from a childhood marked by abuse, silence, and the absence of care. I understood this through my mother's careful telling of his story, offered in fragments across years after he was gone. His addiction was a response to harm that preceded the first drink, a form of self-medication for a soul wound that colonial systems produced and that no clinical program ever reached (Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998; Duran, 2006).

The first participant's narrative traced a nearly identical arc. Growing up within a family defined by cycles of domestic violence, parental separation, and chronic alcohol use, she internalized alcohol as an ordinary feature of daily life before adolescence had fully begun. The literature documents this trajectory with precision: early exposure to adult patterns of drinking and familial conflict establishes a foundation upon which adolescent peer culture further normalizes substance use. Once alcohol becomes a medium of social cohesion at a formative

age, it carries an increasingly high probability of being adopted as a coping mechanism in adulthood (Evans-Campbell, 2008; Linklater, 2014; Methot, 2019; Weaver, 1997). What this participant's story added to this framework was the generational depth of the pattern, her parents' cycle of separation and reconciliation, three remarriages, and the domestic violence that wove tenderness and harm into the same relational fabric. Anda et al. (2006) document the long-term neurobiological consequences of such early environments, demonstrating that a child's brain development is shaped as profoundly by the safety or chaos of their surroundings as by their genetic inheritance. This finding resonates with my own clinical experience: I have watched the same emotional architecture appear across the lives of those I serve, emotions that feel larger than a single lifetime, grief without a clear source, anger without language.

The second participant's account deepened this finding by demonstrating that addiction can take root through the internalization of colonial stereotypes. Beginning substance use at twelve, excluded from her peer community based on tribal identity, she described a devastating logic: that to be Native and to be accepted, she needed to drink heavily. She thought she was drinking her way into her own identity. Duran and Duran (1995) theorize this as the internalization of postcolonial psychology, in which the drunken Indian trope becomes a distorted blueprint during the critical developmental window of adolescence. Gonzalez and Skewes (2021) identify this internalization of biological vulnerability as a specific risk factor that accelerates substance use frequency. What this participant's narrative exposed was the way that colonial misrepresentation reaches inside young Indigenous people and corrupts the very pathway through which they seek to belong. Her substance use was an act of desperate identity formation, not an expression of weakness.

Across both accounts, and across the supporting narratives gathered from additional participants, the finding holds - addiction within Indigenous communities arises as a collective wound in the body of kinship, shaped by forced removal, assimilation policies, the systematic destruction of land and language relationships, and the intergenerational transmission of unresolved grief (Brave Heart, 2003; Evans-Campbell, 2008; Sherman et al., 2025; Weiss et al., 2023). This finding directly challenges the dominant treatment paradigm, which continues to frame substance use as individual pathology while severing distress from its historical, cultural, and relational context (Chavarria, 2017; Kirmayer et al., 2011; Linklater, 2014).

Finding Two: Compliance without Readiness Produces Performance, Not Healing

A second major finding concerns the gap between institutional participation in treatment and the interior conditions required for genuine transformation. The first participant cycled through multiple rounds of inpatient and outpatient programming, candidly acknowledging that she performed the expected behaviors and told clinicians what they wanted to hear throughout each cycle. She signed attendance sheets for Alcoholics Anonymous at bars. She acknowledged that even her children's well-being, one of the most powerful emotional levers available, could produce no authentic change when the internal ground for change had not yet been prepared. This distinction between compliance and readiness has appeared throughout my own clinical work with profound consistency. I have sat with people who can recite program language fluently while concealing ongoing substance use with equal fluency, and I have sat with people who stumble through every session and arrive, eventually, at something real. The difference rarely lies in the program. It lies in the relational conditions that surround it (Duran, 2006; Linklater, 2014; Methot, 2019).

Chavarria (2017) and Rowan et al. (2014) substantiate this finding through qualitative research documenting the centrality of narrative and meaning-making to authentic recovery processes. When a person has access to a story that explains their suffering, one that connects their pain to something larger than personal failure, which locates their wound within a web of historical and relational causes, the interior ground shifts. Something becomes possible that compliance alone cannot reach. The first participant's recovery did not begin until an Elder offered her a teaching about the spiritual meaning of a hangover - that the soul leaves when alcohol enters, and that the discomfort of the morning after is evidence of spiritual absence rather than physical consequence (Duran, 2006; Gone, 2013; Hartmann & Gone, 2012). That single relational teaching, offered within a cultural framework, accomplished what years of institutional programming could not. This finding has direct implications for how clinical training should prepare counselors to work within Indigenous communities.

Finding Three: Grief, Loss, and the Deepening of Substance Use

A third prominent finding is that unresolved grief, experienced both personally and intergenerationally, consistently deepened and prolonged substance use among participants. The first participant described a cascading accumulation of loss: her daughter's struggle with addiction and eventual death from overdose, the assumption of caregiving responsibility for her infant grandchild while still managing her own active use, and the subsequent deaths of her father and close friends in rapid succession. Each loss without adequate cultural or emotional support intensified the conditions in which alcohol provided temporary relief from pain that had nowhere else to go (Evans-Campbell, 2008; Kirmayer et al., 2009; Marsh et al., 2016; Whitesell & Kaufman, 2017).

This finding carries personal weight for me. My brother's girlfriend died of a drug overdose in 2025. My brother was not beside her when it happened, and I was not prepared for what I witnessed when the news reached him; his body went rigid, the color drained from his face, the weight of grief settled across his shoulders like something physical. He had loved her within the only relational framework that addiction and colonial rupture had left available to both of them, volatile, complex, dangerous, and real. I cried for the children she left behind, for the empty spaces that would follow them. I cried for my brother, whose grief carries itself in silence. Moreover, I cried for the Indigenous women whose deaths accumulate quietly, reduced to statistics rather than stories, mourned in households that have already practiced too much silence for too long. Brave Heart and DeBruyn (1998) name this accumulation as a historical trauma response. What my brother's reaction confirmed for me was that unaddressed grief does not stay still. It moves through the body, through the family, through the bottle, and into the next generation's inheritance.

Finding Four: Spiritual and Cultural Reconnection as the Architecture of Recovery

The fourth and most generative finding of this study is that sustained recovery within Indigenous communities arises through spiritual and cultural reconnection rather than through programmatic intervention alone. Both of the principal participants arrived at sobriety through pathways that Western treatment models had neither designed nor anticipated. The first participant's fifteen and a half years of sobriety, the longest period of her life, was built not through AA, which she explicitly stated did not meet her needs, but through prayer, language revitalization, and the gradual reclamation of her Elder identity within her tribal community. The second participant's transformation occurred during a Sundance ceremony, in the presence of an eclipse, when she prayed with an intensity she had never before known, in the language and

ways passed down through generations, and felt her addiction cross over to the other side of that celestial moment. She described it as the Creator lifting her craving from her body. In the days and weeks that followed, sobriety became a daily act of coming home to herself rather than a declaration of having quit something.

These accounts align with McCormick's (2000) identification of reconnection with tradition as the most significant factor in Indigenous healing, and with Kirmayer et al.'s (2011) demonstration that spiritual and cultural practices foster resilience, belonging, and long-term wellness in ways that Western clinical models consistently fail to replicate. Rowan et al. (2014), in their systematic review of cultural interventions for addiction in Indigenous populations, document the effectiveness of land-based and ceremonially grounded approaches. The second participant's recovery illustrates what Cajete (2000) describes as seeking life — the process of harmonizing one's inner world with the greater rhythms of the universe (p. 74). Kawagley (1995) offers a framework for understanding her eclipse experience through the tetrahedral connection among human, natural, and spirit worlds, in which a transformation in the celestial realm creates the conditions for parallel transformation within the human spirit. Napoleon (2013) situates this further within Indigenous legal orders, arguing that sobriety pursued through ceremony and ancestral responsibility constitutes a form of self-governance rather than merely the cessation of a behavior. Both participants' recoveries reflect Survivance, the creative, active presence described by Vizenor (2008) as the ongoing assertion of Indigenous life beyond the narratives of damage and deficit imposed by colonial systems.

The first participant's commitment to language revitalization, creating educational videos, songs, and games through which she now teaches children their Indigenous language, illustrates how healing extends beyond the individual and becomes generative for the community.

Kirmayer et al. (2011) describe language as a repository of cultural knowledge, and engagement in its revitalization as a direct act of cultural continuity that builds collective resilience. This finding confirms the study's central theoretical claim: that recovery within Indigenous communities reaches its fullest expression when it restores not only the individual's sobriety but their relationships to land, language, kinship, ceremony, and ancestral responsibility.

Finding Six: Memory, Dream, and Visual Art as Instruments of Healing Knowledge

The sixth and final finding concerns the epistemological dimensions of the study itself. Memory, dreaming, and visual art emerged across this research as primary instruments of healing knowledge rather than supplemental or expressive modes. This finding is partly methodological and partly substantive: it concerns both how this inquiry produced knowledge and what the knowledge it produced reveals about the nature of healing within Indigenous communities.

Throughout the interviews, narrating the past functioned as a form of healing in itself. Memory, as Hampton (1995) argues, serves as a bridge between personal experience and collective history, enabling individuals to reconnect with themselves through the practice of remembrance. Several participants experienced moments in the interviews in which the act of speaking a story aloud, often for the first time, within a silence that had protected it for years, produced a visible shift in the body: a release of breath, a slowing of speech, a quiet that arrived after the telling. These moments confirmed Archibald's (2008) claim that storytelling functions as both method and ethical practice, that receiving a story with reverence is itself an act of relational restoration.

Dreams functioned as epistemological instruments throughout this dissertation. In my dreams, my father appears as he was when he was young, powerful, ancestral, liberated from the

weight that alcohol placed on his spirit during his living years. These dream encounters have taught me things about him and about my relationship with him that waking memory could never reach alone. Through them, I came to understand that the healing of a relationship does not require the person to still be present in the living world. Story and dream together can bridge what physical time has severed. This understanding, which I carry as personal knowledge, is confirmed by the broader Indigenous epistemological literature, which consistently positions dreaming as a form of legitimate inquiry grounded in relationship with ancestors, land, and the spirit world (Cajete, 2000; Friedland & Napoleon, 2015; Hampton, 1995).

The visual art narratives produced throughout this study, including the beadwork, digital collage, portraiture, and photography that appear across these chapters, demonstrate that certain dimensions of healing refuse the boundaries of written or spoken language. My mother beaded at our kitchen table, threading each bead with patience and precision, and I understood through watching her that making is a form of remembering. In my own artistic work, I documented my brother's struggle with addiction through portraiture, asking myself what art is for if it does not help others see differently through an Indigenous lens. Motta-Ochoa et al. (2024) document a growing evidence base for art-based interventions with Indigenous peoples. Tuck (2009) argues that desire-based frameworks reposition communities within narratives of resilience rather than damage. The art produced within and alongside this study operationalizes both claims, offering dimensions of witness, beauty, and relational honesty that scholarly prose alone cannot carry.

Synthesis: What the Findings, Taken Together, Reveal

Taken together, these six findings articulate a coherent and consistent account of addiction and healing within Indigenous communities that the existing literature on its own cannot fully express. What this study adds is the simultaneous presence of the scholarly and the living the

researcher's own family history alongside the participants' accounts, the theoretical frameworks alongside the dreams and the beadwork, the citations alongside the grief that informed every question asked. The Cottonwood tree that has guided this dissertation from its first pages is the right metaphor for what these findings reveal: that healing within Indigenous communities grows as trees grow, not by erasing the wound but by building rings around it, adding growth and memory and seasonal witness to a core that includes the harm and endures it and reaches still toward light. My brother's story has never reached its resolution. He continues to struggle. Moreover, I continue to refuse the conclusion that his struggle defines what is possible for him. That refusal grounded in love, in kinship, in the ancestral teachings of a people who survived what was designed to eliminate them is also a finding. It is perhaps the most important one this study offers.

Interpretations and Conclusions

The foundational claim of Chapter 2’s literature review is that addiction within Indigenous communities arises from colonial disruption rather than individual pathology. The review drew on Duran (2006), whose concept of the soul frames colonial violence as an initiating wound that becomes internalized and self-perpetuating within the spirit. It cited Brave Heart (1998), Brave Heart and DeBruyn (1998), and Brave Heart et al. (2011) to establish historical trauma as the cumulative emotional and psychological wounding that travels through bodies and families as living grief. It positioned Evans-Campbell's (2008) multilevel framework as the structural architecture through which individual suffering, family disruption, and community harm exist as inseparable rather than sequential phenomena. The findings of this study confirm all three frameworks and push each further.

What the findings confirm is that substance use, in every account gathered in this study, emerged from conditions of fractured kinship, cultural disconnection, and inherited silence rather

than from personal moral failure. The first participant normalized alcohol before adolescence through exposure to adult cycles of domestic violence, separation, and reconciliation, a pattern that Methot (2019) names with precision as survival-based learning, the nervous system's adaptation to chronic instability. The second participant internalized the drunken Indian colonial stereotype as a blueprint for belonging during adolescence, beginning substance use at twelve in an act Duran and Duran (1995) theorize as the postcolonial corruption of identity formation. My own family confirms the same architecture; my father's alcohol use was inseparable from a childhood shaped by abuse and the absence of care. This wound preceded the first drink and was never addressed clinically during his lifetime. My brother carries something structurally similar. At 48, the origins of his substance use disorder reach into the same inherited terrain — the silence our father modeled, the grief that accumulated without language or community to hold it, the colonial disruption of kinship and belonging that shaped every generation before us (Brave Heart, 1998; Weiss et al., 2023).

What this study extends beyond the existing literature is the intimacy and specificity with which these structural claims are demonstrated. Chapter 2 surveyed the scholarship; Chapter 4 gave it bodies, voices, and histories. The literature establishes that addiction reflects relational rupture at the collective level. This study shows what that rupture looks like at the scale of a specific family, one man's rigid body in a hospital chair, his uneven breath, his silence on the drive across town. It shows what it sounds like when a young woman says she thought she was drinking her way into her own identity. It shows what it carries, how I write these pages, and who woke up in a childhood home where my shoes were always positioned by the door in case I needed to run. Gone et al. (2019) argue that situating substance use within collective stories reveals how colonial history and contemporary systems shape pathways into and through

addiction. This study provides a situated relational depth that population-level research cannot reach.

The Failure of Deficit-Based Frameworks: Challenging the Literature

Chapter 2 documents the persistent inadequacy of Western biomedical and deficit-based treatment models for addressing addiction within Indigenous communities. Linklater (2014) argues that mainstream psychiatric and clinical approaches fail because they impose a Western lens dissonant with the patient's lived reality and ancestral knowledge. Waldram (2004) demonstrates that many conventional mental health constructs are colonial impositions that construct the Indigenous mind through deficit and dysfunction rather than cultural reality. Chavarria (2017), Kirmayer et al. (2011), and Johnson-Jennings et al. (2023) collectively establish that conventional treatment frameworks sever distress from land, culture, and collective memory, producing interventions that address symptoms while leaving their historical roots intact.

The findings of this study challenge those frameworks with the particularity of lived experience. The first participant cycled through multiple inpatient and outpatient programs across years, performing the expected behaviors and providing the responses that clinicians sought, because the internal conditions for genuine readiness had never been created. Western treatment programming offered her compliance structures without the relational safety, cultural grounding, or spiritual framework through which authentic change eventually arrived. She arrived at fifteen and a half years of sustained sobriety through prayer, Elder teaching, language revitalization, and the slow reclamation of her identity as a woman becoming an Elder in her community, none of which any institutional program designed or offered her. This finding extends Linklater's (2014) argument by demonstrating what the alternative looks like in practice:

healing through reconnection to spirit, language, and ancestral responsibility rather than through symptom management and compliance measurement.

The second participant's account challenges the deficit framework at an even deeper structural level. She achieved sobriety through a Sundance ceremony during an eclipse, through prayer in the language of her ancestors, through the felt sense that her addiction crossed to the other side of that celestial moment. Western clinical models have no category for this experience. They cannot accommodate it within their frameworks of evidence-based practice. However, it produced a sobriety that white-knuckled abstinence, institutional programming, and years of functional alcohol use disorder could not. Cajete (2000) describes this process as seeking the harmonization of the inner world with the greater rhythms of the universe (p. 74). Kawagley (1995) frames it through the tetrahedral connection among human, natural, and spirit worlds. Napoleon (2013) situates it within Indigenous legal orders, through which sobriety is enacted via ceremony, constituting an act of self-governance rather than behavioral cessation. Collectively, these frameworks from Chapter 2 gain their fullest empirical weight through this participant's account, and the conclusion they demand is unambiguous: the deficit-based paradigm does not heal what colonial rupture has broken, and the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 now has the experiential evidence of this study behind it.

Land as Healer and Teacher: Expanding the Literature

Chapter 2 engaged extensively with the scholarship of land-based healing and recovery. Tuck and McKenzie (2015) argue that land functions as a pedagogical force, a teacher and a relative that carries the histories and futures of its people, and that self-discovery is fundamentally a spatial journey of reconnecting with cultural geography rather than purely an interior one. Kimmerer (2013) frames storytelling as a grammar of animacy that reconnects the

land to people, positioning narrative as a form of medicine that can remake a shattered sense of self. Simpson (2014, 2017) theorizes land as pedagogy and argues that extraction and assimilation operate together, that removing a person from their land strips away the meaning and relationships that give life coherence. Absolon (2022) argues that healing, understood as the embodied spiritual journey of locating oneself in relation to the land, serves as the necessary starting point for any genuine recovery process. Redvers (2020) documents Indigenous practitioners in northern Canada affirming directly that the land itself is a healer.

This study expands that body of literature in two significant directions. The first is through the second participant's account of the spiritual dissonance she experienced when her professional work required her to approve fossil fuel extraction on land she understood as a living relative. Deloria (2003) theorizes Indigenous identity as inseparable from a reciprocal relationship with a specific place, and its severance as a form of rootlessness that reaches deeper than individual psychology. This participant's depression and alcohol use can be understood, through Deloria's framework, as spatial mourning, a reasonable response to the violence of being compelled to treat land as a commodity while her spirit recognized it as kin. This finding gives Deloria's theoretical claim it’s most concrete empirical expression in the context of addiction research: land-based conflict does not remain abstract; it travels into the body and accelerates the conditions through which substance use deepens.

The second expansion relates to my personal connection to land throughout this research. Walking the path of my Ute ancestors in 2023, retracing the route of their forced removal from Colorado to the Uintah and Ouray Reservation, I felt in my body what the literature describes. The dry wind carried what I can only call old grief. The Cottonwood trees stood as witnesses on scarred land. I understood in that moment, more sensorially than intellectually, what Simpson

(2017) means when she writes that extraction removes all of the relationships that give whatever is being taken meaning (p. 75). My great-grandfather walked into a rainbow. My mother carried that story across decades and handed it to me as a form of knowing. Those trees at Red Bridge were there through every winter of my childhood, and my father spoke of them with quiet respect, as living beings. The land-based epistemology of Chapter 2 is confirmed and deepened by these personal histories, which show that land-based healing is not a quick fix or an intervention but a slow, seasonal, bodily return that spans generations (Cajete, 2000; Hardison-Stevens, 2016; Kimmerer, 2013).

Storywork as Living Method: Supporting and Extending Archibald

The literature review in Chapter 2 establishes Indigenous Storywork (Archibald, 2008) as the ethical and epistemological foundation of this study. Archibald's seven principles, respect, responsibility, reverence, reciprocity, holism, interrelatedness, and synergy frame the story as living knowledge rather than content to collect. Archibald and Parent (2019) extend this through the Hand Back, Hands Forward framework, which positions personal recovery as never a solitary act but rather a decolonizing methodology that strengthens the web of relations, enabling one person's journey toward wellness to become a medicine for the entire community. Phillips and Bunda (2018) argue that storytelling is a sovereign and valuable research practice, opposed to the colonial view that treats Indigenous experience as data to be extracted. Atalay (2019) adds the embodied dimension, demonstrating how stories can become embodied through ceremony and land connection, thereby releasing historical, unresolved grief stored in the body.

This study supports all of these claims and advances them through the analytical process of Storyweaving, a methodology developed by the researcher that interprets participant accounts, researcher memories, dreams, and visual art collectively as mutually illuminating rather than

hierarchically arranged. The findings show that Archibald's principles are active within the storytelling encounter itself rather than applied externally. The most instructive moments in every interview occurred when a participant felt truly received, when silence was honored, when laughter was recognized as knowledge, and when the body's faltering was understood as memory surfacing rather than as evidence of inadequacy. These moments, as Archibald writes, transformed the story into a teacher. They also confirm what this dissertation's analytical method revealed: that my own story, memories of childhood winters at Red Bridge, dreams in which my father appears young and free, and years sitting with my brother while he suffers, are themselves data and epistemological tools rather than mere confessional details.

The extension this study provides to Archibald's framework emphasizes the role of visual art as a fundamental and primary element of Storywork rather than merely an illustrative addition. Chapter 2 referenced Motta-Ochoa et al. (2024), whose scoping review highlights the expanding evidence supporting art-based interventions with Indigenous peoples, positioning visual narrative as both method and medicine. It also drew on Vizenor (2008), who conceptualizes visual narrative as Survivance, the active, creative presence that resists colonial narratives of absence and damage. Furthermore, it cited Tuck (2009), who contends that desire-based frameworks reframe communities in stories of resilience and imagination rather than damage and deficit. This study affirms those theoretical perspectives through practice. The beadwork honoring my brother's struggle, the digital collage embodying the presence of ancestors, and the portraiture confronting stigma through relational witnessing do not merely illustrate the argument of this dissertation. They embody it. They serve as evidence equivalent to participant quotations and scholarly citations, and their integration within this work demands that

future Indigenous Storywork scholarship recognize the epistemological authority of visual expression.

Dreams and Memory as Epistemological Authority: An Original Contribution

Chapter 2 explains the theoretical foundation for considering dreams and memory as valid forms of Indigenous knowledge. Hampton (1995) describes healing as a spiritual homecoming in which dreams serve as guides and memory helps preserve cultural resilience. Walters (2010) develops a dream methodology to access ancestral guidance through the dreaming spirit, treating it as a form of data. Deloria (2003) situates these visions within the earth's eternal memory, arguing that what one experiences in dreams is rooted in spatial sovereignty a living spiritual geography rather than mere internal experience. Napoleon and Friedland (2013) see dreaming as a means of being guided toward wholeness and spiritual awakening. Duran (2006) shows that dreams help connect spiritual worlds and provide a foundation for addressing addiction by externalizing its spiritual aspect.

This study advances those frameworks by demonstrating what dream epistemology looks like as a sustained methodological practice across a dissertation-length inquiry. My dreams of my father have served as a form of theoretical instruction throughout this work. In those dreams, he appears as he was before alcohol claimed him, powerful, ancestral, at peace. I have come to understand through those encounters that healing a relationship does not require the person to still be present in the living world, and that story and dream together can bridge what physical time has severed. These insights arrived through dreaming before they found scholarly expression in Momaday (1968), Hampton (1995), and Valaskakis (2005). The Chapter 2 literature review provided the theoretical scaffolding for understanding why those dream encounters carry epistemological authority. The findings of this study demonstrate that they do concretely, across the length of this inquiry, in ways that shaped research questions, sharpened analytical attention,

and informed the interpretive framework applied to participant accounts. This is the original contribution this study makes to the existing literature on dream methodology: demonstrating its sustained operation across a full research inquiry rather than describing it theoretically.

Implications for Practice

I approach this section with the same ethical commitments that guided this entire dissertation: respect, responsibility, reverence, and reciprocity. The implications I draw here do not emerge from a detached analytical position. They are rooted in the living knowledge shared by each participant, and they are inseparable from my own positionality as a Northern Ute woman, a substance use disorder counselor, and a researcher who carries the stories of my own family alongside the stories entrusted to me in this study. As Wilson (2008) reminds us, research is a ceremony, and the knowledge it generates carries relational responsibility. I honor that responsibility here by asking what these stories demand of the systems, institutions, and practitioners whose decisions shape whether healing is possible for Indigenous people.

The findings of this study reveal, with consistency and depth, that addiction within Indigenous communities is not primarily a behavioral disorder located within the individual. It is, as Duran (2006) argues, a soul wound, a form of disconnection from land, kinship, language, spirit, and the self that has been cultivated through centuries of colonial disruption. The participants in this study did not struggle with substances in isolation. Their experiences were shaped by intergenerational trauma, severed cultural ties, identity rupture, and the absence of systems equipped to respond to the whole of their suffering (Methot, 2019; Linklater, 2014; Evans-Campbell, 2008). These findings carry direct implications for how educators, clinicians, administrators, and policymakers must reorient their practice, and I offer them here in that spirit.

Implications for Educators

The narratives gathered in this study illuminate school as a site where disconnection from cultural identity frequently deepens for Indigenous youth. One participant, despite maintaining high academic achievement and athletic involvement, experienced a profound identity rupture during early adolescence when peers challenged the authenticity of her Indigeneity. This rupture, combined with the absence of any culturally grounded support in her educational environment, preceded her initial use of substances at age twelve. Her trajectory reflects what Brave Heart (2003) describes as the cumulative emotional and psychological wounding that manifests across generations, and what Cajete (1994) identifies as the severing of the ecological, relational, and spiritual dimensions of learning that sustain Indigenous young people. When schools are structured only to measure academic performance and behavioral compliance, they render invisible the identity crises that often precipitate substance use.

Another participant traced her earliest drinking to adolescence, within a peer context where alcohol functioned as a pathway to belonging. Her narrative illustrates what Spillane et al. (2023) identify through primary socialization theory: that peer dynamics are a central mechanism in the early normalization of substance use among Indigenous adolescents, particularly when substance use is already present within the family system and when cultural identity lacks institutional affirmation. The school environment she described offered no relational space in which the weight of her home life could be named, her Indigenous identity honored, or cultural knowledge positioned as epistemically significant.

A third participant situated herself at the outset of our interview by naming her mother, her father, and the elders who shaped her. This act of relational placement, of locating oneself within kinship before speaking, is itself a form of Indigenous pedagogy (Archibald, 2008;

Wilson, 2008). When educational institutions fail to make space for this way of knowing, they communicate implicitly that Indigenous identity is supplemental to the academic project. Cajete (2000) argues that this severance, the disconnection of community, land, and self from the learning process, is itself a form of harm. The implications for educators are therefore structural and pedagogical, not merely cultural.

My own development as a researcher and practitioner was shaped in part by the absence of educational spaces where I could name what I was living. I grew up in a household where my father's struggle with addiction shaped the rhythms of our daily life, and I navigated those realities without the benefit of teachers trained to recognize historical trauma as a context for learning. As Ball and Moselle (2013) emphasize, the disruption of Indigenous fathering relationships through colonial assimilation policies has produced intergenerational consequences that schools are rarely equipped to handle. My older sister's unresolved trauma, and the years she carried it before finding sobriety, reflect what Smye et al. (2023) document as the ongoing social suffering that accumulates when institutional spaces consistently fail to meet Indigenous people where they are.

Educators at every level must understand that cultural safety is a foundational prerequisite for learning, not an enrichment activity appended to an otherwise unchanged curriculum. This requires substantive professional development in historical and intergenerational trauma, training that goes beyond awareness-raising to equip teachers to reframe behavioral and academic difficulties as responses to structural harm rather than evidence of individual deficiency (Brave Heart, 2003). It also requires the recognition that language revitalization is among the most consequential interventions available. One participant's recovery was inextricably linked to her return to her Indigenous language and to her work transmitting it

to children through songs, games, and educational media she developed herself. Kirmayer et al. (2011) identify language engagement as a direct act of cultural continuity that builds resilience. Simpson (2014) frames land-based pedagogy rooted in Indigenous language as both an educational method and an act of resurgence. Schools that treat Indigenous languages as optional enrichment rather than living medicine communicate, with institutional force, that those languages and the peoples who carry them occupy a secondary position in the project of learning.

Implications for Clinicians and Treatment Providers

Perhaps the most urgent clinical implication arising from this study is the distinction between compliance and genuine internal readiness for change. One participant described moving through multiple cycles of inpatient and outpatient treatment, telling clinicians what was expected, satisfying program requirements, and maintaining the appearance of engagement while continuing to struggle. Her account illustrates what Duran (2006) and Linklater (2014) identify as a defining limitation of Western intervention models: their reliance on behavioral compliance as a proxy for recovery, in the absence of any meaningful engagement with the spiritual, relational, and land-based dimensions of healing. What ultimately reached this participant was a single teaching offered within a relationship: the understanding that a hangover represents the departure of the soul, that the disorientation of intoxication is a form of spiritual absence. That one relational offering accomplished what years of clinical programming had not, because it named the dimension of suffering that the clinical model had no language for.

A second participant described sustaining sobriety through what she called white-knuckled effort, holding on without tools, without community, and without anything to fill the space that alcohol had occupied. Her eventual turning point did not occur in a clinical setting. It occurred during an eclipse, in a sweat lodge, while she was praying in her ancestral language

alongside her brother and father. She described her experience as her addiction crossing to the other side. Napoleon (2013) extends this understanding by arguing that Indigenous legal orders embedded within ceremony create a framework for self-governance, and that returning to ceremony is therefore an act of restoring right relations rather than simply a coping mechanism. These are not peripheral or supplementary dimensions of treatment. They are the mechanisms through which healing actually occurred for this participant.

The account of my own sister's navigation of withdrawal without medical support remains one of the most direct indictments of what our current systems offer. She survived through a resilience that Kirmayer et al. (2011) describe as fostered by cultural practice, spiritual connection, and belonging within community. That she possessed such resilience is a testament to her strength. That resilience was required in the absence of adequate institutional support reflects what Smye et al. (2023) document as the social suffering Indigenous people routinely endure when existing systems are structurally unsuited to their needs. These are not individual failures. They are the consequences of systemic design.

Clinicians working with Indigenous clients must fundamentally reconceptualize their assessment frameworks. Standard intake questions focused on quantity and frequency of use do not assess the relational and spiritual dimensions of disconnection that this study identifies as central to Indigenous substance use. The more clinically significant inquiry is what the person has been severed from: land, ancestors, cultural practice, a sense of belonging that precedes and exceeds individual psychology. One participant's depression and alcohol use were inseparable from the moral and spiritual injury of being required, through her professional role, to approve fossil fuel extraction on land she understood as a living relative. Deloria (2003) describes this as a form of spatial mourning, a grief rooted in forced participation in the desecration of the very

places that constitute Indigenous identity. No clinical model oriented solely toward behavioral or cognitive change has the capacity to hold that kind of suffering.

Treatment programs must integrate cultural and spiritual practice as structural components of their healing frameworks, not as optional add-ons to a Euro-Western clinical core. Rowan et al. (2014), in a systematic review of cultural interventions for addiction in Indigenous populations, found that programs failing to incorporate cultural identity and community belonging consistently produced lower rates of sustained recovery. McCormick (2000) identifies reconnection with tradition as the most significant healing factor for Indigenous people, noting that the return to culture functions as a protective resource that Euro-Western clinical models cannot replicate. The stories shared in this study affirm these findings with particular clarity. Prayer, ceremony, language, and relational accountability were not peripheral to recovery for these participants. They were its substance.

Implications for Administrators

The structural conditions within which clinicians, educators, and community practitioners operate are shaped by administrative decisions, and those decisions carry consequences that are felt in the lives of Indigenous people seeking healing. The stories gathered in this study intersect at multiple points with institutional structures that were not designed to support the kind of recovery that is documented here. Evans-Campbell (2008) describes the multilevel nature of historical trauma's impact, emphasizing that individual suffering cannot be meaningfully addressed without attending to the institutional and structural conditions that perpetuate harm. Administrators bear responsibility for those conditions.

One of the most consequential areas requiring administrative attention is the definition and measurement of outcomes. When treatment programs are evaluated primarily on the basis of

short-term abstinence rates, they organize themselves to produce those rates. The findings of this study suggest that the outcomes most meaningfully associated with sustained Indigenous recovery are those that extend across a longer temporal horizon: the restoration of kinship ties, reengagement with cultural and ceremonial practice, the development of a stable identity rooted in community belonging, and the capacity to take on intergenerational relational responsibility. One participant described her emergence as an Elder, her teaching of her Indigenous language to children, and her assumption of cultural leadership roles as dimensions of her healing that were inseparable from her sobriety. Kirmayer et al. (2011) demonstrate that precisely these practices foster resilience, belonging, and long-term wellness within Indigenous communities. Administrators must work to develop evaluation frameworks capacious enough to capture these outcomes.

The composition and cultural competency of institutional staff represents an equally pressing administrative concern. When behavioral health organizations serving Indigenous communities do not reflect those communities in cultural and relational knowledge, not merely in demographic representation, they are structurally limited in what they can offer. The knowledge carried by Elders, cultural practitioners, and language holders constitutes clinical knowledge of the highest order for the population these institutions serve. Pihama and Tuhiwai Smith (2023) argue that Indigenous knowledge systems must be recognized and resourced as epistemically equal to Western credentialed knowledge within healing institutions. When compensation structures do not reflect this equivalence, the institutional message, transmitted through every interaction between provider and participant, is that Indigenous ways of knowing are subordinate. That message compounds the very disconnection that treatment is meant to address.

Universities and professional training programs must also consider their role in preparing the next generation of practitioners. My father did not have access to a clinician trained to understand the relational, cultural, and historical aspects of his suffering. The systems available to my sister during her early recovery were shaped by practitioners who had not been equipped to engage with Indigenous epistemologies. Smith (2021) argues that decolonizing methodologies require not just adding Indigenous content to an otherwise unchanged curriculum but fundamentally reorienting the curriculum's core knowledge structure. Such a transformation depends on administrative decision-making and demands institutional commitment, continuous resources, and a sincere acknowledgment of whose ways of knowing have been prioritized in producing professional knowledge.

Implications for Policymakers

The findings of this study place Indigenous substance use within a structural and political context that policy must be willing to address directly. One participant's depression and alcohol use disorder were linked to her professional experience of having to approve fossil fuel extraction projects on land she considered her living relatives. Deloria (2003) describes this kind of displacement as creating a rootlessness that extends beyond individual psychology, leading to a grief rooted in the desecration of places that shape identity. Walters et al. (2010) provide empirical evidence of the connection between land displacement and disease among American Indian and Alaska Native peoples, showing that broken ties to land are directly associated with higher rates of substance use, mental health issues, and chronic illness. Policies that lead to Indigenous people's alienation from land are, in this framework, policies that promote addiction (NIDA, 2024).

Land access for ceremonies, language transmission, and subsistence practices, and the land-based education that one participant described building for children in her community is inseparable from healing. Johnson-Jennings et al. (2020) provide empirical evidence that land-based healing interventions lead to measurable improvements in substance use outcomes by restoring the relational and spiritual connections severed by colonial policies. Redvers (2020) documents the consensus among Indigenous healing practitioners across northern Canada that land is the primary healer, not a metaphor for healing, but its actual site and substance. Policies that restrict Indigenous land access while funding substance use treatment programs operate in a structural contradiction, addressing the symptoms while perpetuating the wound.

The structure of federal and state funding for substance use treatment needs significant reform. Current requirements that programs prove adherence to evidence-based practices effectively mandate the use of Euro-Western clinical models validated on populations and epistemological assumptions that do not reflect the communities in this study. Rowan et al. (2014) identify culturally grounded interventions as effective for Indigenous populations, yet these approaches remain consistently underfunded compared to Western clinical models. Policymakers have both the authority and responsibility to broaden the definition of evidence-based practice to include evidence generated within the populations served, evaluated against outcomes that reflect the full scope of Indigenous healing. This expansion is not just a programmatic change; it is a matter of sovereign recognition, and it is long overdue.

Limitations of the Study

Naming the limitations of this study is itself an act of relational accountability. I do not approach this section as a routine academic exercise. I see it as a responsibility to the participants who shared their stories with me, to the communities this research serves, and to future

researchers who might follow a similar path. Every study has boundaries. This one's boundaries are shaped by its very nature: it is intimate, relational, land-based, and deeply personal. I believe these qualities are its greatest strengths, and I also recognize that they impose constraints worth acknowledging honestly (Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008).

Small Sample Size and Scope of Transferability

This study engaged six participants across several Indigenous communities, including four women and one man who shared their stories of addiction, recovery, and cultural reconnection through the framework of Indigenous Storywork (Archibald, 2008). My own story, woven alongside those of my family members, including my sister's journey through recovery and withdrawal, my brother's ongoing battle with addiction, and my father's lifelong struggle with alcohol, also functions as data within this relational methodology (Wilson, 2008). Together, these voices form a rich and layered dataset. However, the small number of participants means that these findings cannot be generalized across all Indigenous communities or all expressions of addiction and recovery. This is a conscious methodological choice rooted in Indigenous research principles rather than a flaw to be corrected. As Kovach (2009) argues, Indigenous inquiry honors the depth and particularity of each story rather than pursuing breadth or statistical representation. Readers and practitioners should understand that the experiences documented here reflect specific people in specific places and times and should be applied to other contexts with cultural humility and care.

The participants represented a range of tribal affiliations, geographic locations, and life experiences, which adds richness to the findings. At the same time, several communities, including urban Indigenous populations and Indigenous men, remain underrepresented in this study. One participant's story reflects the experience of a woman navigating identity, belonging,

and substance use in a setting where her tribal affiliation was questioned by peers. Another participant's story is shaped by adoption, grandparental care, and the particular grief of early family separation. A third participant's recovery unfolded through spiritual intervention during ceremony. A fourth participant's path moved through early marriage, repeated treatment cycles, and the slow return to language and Elder identity. These narratives collectively illuminate important dimensions of Indigenous recovery, yet they represent particular lived realities rather than universal ones. Future research that centers Indigenous men, Two-Spirit individuals, and urban Indigenous communities would deepen what this study begins (Evans-Campbell, 2008; Gone et al., 2019).

Recruitment Through Social Media and Voluntary Participation

Participants were recruited through a social media invitation shared in October 2025 (see Figure 11) that described the study's focus on stories, art, and land-based memories as ways to understand addiction and recovery. This recruitment method reached people already engaged with social media, which created a certain selection bias. Those currently in active addiction, lacking access to technology, living in areas without reliable internet, or in crisis are less likely to have seen or responded to the invitation. Therefore, the voices gathered here reflect individuals who had achieved a level of stability or enough distance from their experiences to choose participation. This is a meaningful group to study. It also means that the full range of Indigenous experiences with addiction, especially those in earlier or more acute stages, remains outside the scope of this research (Tuck, 2009).

Additionally, participation was completely voluntary, and more than twenty responses were received before six participants were chosen based on informed consent and the alignment of their stories with the study's relational and land-based focus. While this selection process was

thoughtful and ethically grounded, it means that the stories collected here come from individuals willing and prepared to share. The Indigenous Storywork methodology respects this readiness as a form of relational responsibility, recognizing that stories are shared as gifts and offered by those who are ready to give them (Archibald, 2008; Michell, 1999). At the same time, participating in a formal study requires a certain level of access, comfort, and trust, which are shaped by prior experiences with researchers, institutions, and the academy. Communities harmed by extractive research practices may be less represented here because of that (Smith, 2021; Tuck & Yang, 2014).

Memory, Trauma, and the Limits of Narrative Recall

Several participants described significant gaps in their childhood and early adolescence memories, linking them directly to the neurological and psychological effects of early heavy drinking and chronic trauma exposure. One participant mentioned a persistent fog over her high school memories, which she attributed to the amount of alcohol she drank during those years. Another described early childhood fragments as hazy and uncertain, comparing her recollections to those of an older sibling who remembered the same events more clearly. Anda et al. (2006) document how adverse childhood experiences influence brain development and change long-term memory encoding, findings that are directly relevant to understanding why some participants recall events with vivid detail while others can only gesture toward what they know happened.

These memory gaps are a limitation because they create incomplete narratives. They are also significant findings. In Indigenous Storywork, silence and the spaces between words carry meaning (Couchie & Miguel, 2018). The inability to remember is itself a form of testimony, evidence of what the body and mind did to survive. I approached these silences with the same

attention I gave to direct speech, and I carefully documented my interpretive process in my reflective journal. Even so, I recognize that the picture painted by this study is partly shaped by what memory preserved and what it protected itself from having to hold.

Geographic and Cultural Specificity

This study is rooted in specific communities, landscapes, and cultural frameworks. The Ute Indian Tribe's lands, the Pacific Northwest communities represented by several participants, and the unnamed tribal affiliation of the participant who requested full anonymity each have their own histories, governance structures, ceremonial practices, and relationships to land. My own formation as a Northern Ute woman, practicing and researching on Ute lands, provides this work with a particular grounding that reflects my perspective as an insider researcher within one of those communities (Battiste, 2002). That rootedness is a strength. It also means that findings rooted in Ute land and cosmology, in the cottonwood tree as a keeper of memory, and in the specific teachings about the soul and the hangover shared within one community context, may resonate differently or require different framing in other Indigenous communities.

I resist the idea that Indigenous experience is uniform, and I have aimed throughout this dissertation to honor the uniqueness of each participant's story rather than reducing it to a generalized Indigenous narrative. Cajete (2000) warns that Indigenous knowledge is always place-based and relationally specific. Smith (2021) similarly contends that research within Indigenous communities must resist the tendency to produce findings that blur the distinctions between peoples, places, and histories. The insights from this study are presented as lessons from specific communities and individuals, intended to guide practice while remaining attentive to local contexts rather than replacing community-specific knowledge with universal claims.

The Limits of a Single Methodological Framework

Indigenous Storywork serves as both the methodology and the theoretical framework of this study, meaning that the analytic lens and data collection method share the same epistemological foundation (Archibald, 2008). This intentional coherence ensures that the study avoids contradictions by not using Western extractive methods to gather stories and then applying them within an Indigenous framework, a contradiction that has weakened previous research in this area (Chilisa, 2012; Tuck & Yang, 2014). However, using a single framework also means that aspects of experience that might be highlighted by other approaches, such as clinical psychology's trauma frameworks, neurobiological models of addiction, or quantitative epidemiological data, fall outside the scope of this study's primary analysis.

I draw on these bodies of literature to provide supporting context throughout the dissertation, especially to ground participant experiences within broader patterns documented in research on historical trauma, adverse childhood experiences, and substance use epidemiology among Indigenous populations (Anda et al., 2006; Brave Heart, 2003; Spencer et al., 2023). The primary mode of inquiry remains storied, relational, and land-based. Readers should understand that this is a deliberate methodological stance, one that emphasizes the integrity and sovereignty of Indigenous knowledge systems over the comprehensiveness that a mixed-methods design might provide (Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008).

Time, Depth, and the Boundaries of a Single Interview

Each participant was interviewed once, in a single extended conversation. The Storywork process used to analyze these narratives was iterative and layered, moving through six cycles of listening, reading, coding, thematic synthesis, visual analysis, and verification (Archibald, 2008; Couchie & Miguel, 2018). However, the underlying data for each participant remains a single

conversation, supplemented where available by visual materials, reflective documents, and resonance notes from the interview itself.

There is much that a single interview cannot hold. Stories deepen with return visits. Trust develops over time. One participant shared that she had never spoken some parts of her story aloud before our conversation, and I am aware that what she was able to offer in that first telling was shaped by what she was ready to release in that moment. A longitudinal or multi-session design would have allowed participants to return to their stories, revise them, recall things they had not initially considered, and respond to emerging themes in the analysis as the study progressed. The verification cycle built into the storyweaving framework offered a partial response to this limitation, inviting participants to review excerpts and summaries and to correct or expand on the representation of their stories. Even so, I hold this as a genuine boundary of the study and one that future researchers in this area would do well to address (Kovach, 2019; Archibald, 2008).

The Weight of the Researcher's Own Story

I end this discussion the way I try to end every difficult conversation - with honesty. My personal story is embedded in this research. My father's addiction, my sister's recovery, my brother's ongoing struggles, my younger sister's death in 1994 in an accident caused by a drunk driver, and my own development as a counselor and researcher on the land where my family has lived, grieved, and healed—these elements are woven into the fabric of this study (Momaday, 1968; Valaskakis, 2005). I am also a Northern Ute woman, a substance use disorder counselor practicing on Ute Indian Tribe lands, a doctoral candidate, and an artist. These identities do not sit separately from this research. They are the research. Indigenous Storywork explicitly positions the researcher as a participant in the knowledge-making process, recognizing that

relationships between the researcher and the researched are sites of meaning rather than sources of contamination (Archibald, 2008; Smith, 2021). At the same time, my dual roles as a clinician and a researcher, and my personal and familial connection to the subject matter, created layers of complexity that require honest examination. This means the same blind spots, unresolved grief, and embodied memories that have shaped who I am also influenced what I observed in the data, what I asked during the interviews, and how I interpreted what I heard.

I have tried to approach this study with humility and care. I engaged with a research journal throughout the process, sought guidance from cultural knowledge holders and my dissertation committee, and used the Storywork cycles to verify my interpretations against the actual language and experiences of the participants. As Ermine (2007) describes, the ethical space of engagement between Indigenous and Western knowledge systems requires ongoing reflexivity and a willingness to recognize the limits of one's own perspective. I have attempted to inhabit that space as responsibly as I can. What I can say with confidence is that everything in this study has been offered with accountability to the people who entrusted me with their stories, to the communities those stories belong to, and to the land that sustains all of it.

There were moments in the interviews when a participant's experience mirrored something from my own family so closely that I had to consciously hold the boundary between listening as a researcher and responding as a counselor. I maintained a research journal throughout the study to document these moments of resonance and discomfort, using reflexive writing as a tool for tracking how my own history shaped what I heard, what I emphasized, and what I may have unconsciously sought in each story (Chilisa, 2012). This journal practice, grounded in the storyweaving cycles I developed as my analytic framework, helped me remain

accountable to the integrity of each participant's narrative rather than allowing my own story to absorb theirs.

I also recognize that participants who knew about my counseling role in the community may have adjusted their disclosures accordingly, either sharing more openly because they trusted my clinical sensitivity or holding back out of concern for how it could affect their relationship with community services. I clearly stated at the start of each interview that my role was as a researcher, not a counselor. I also emphasized participant autonomy and the right to withdraw at any time without consequences (Kovach, 2009). Even so, the power dynamics inherent in any research relationship, especially within small Indigenous communities, cannot be fully neutralized. These dynamics influenced the data in ways that are difficult to fully trace but are important to acknowledge.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study opened doors that I couldn't fully walk through. It raised questions I could hear forming in the silences between words during interviews, in the gaps that memory couldn't fill, and in the lives of my own family members whose stories are woven throughout this work. What follows is my gift to the next researcher, the next community member who picks up this thread and carries it forward. These recommendations come from a place of deep respect for what each participant shared with me, for what my sister's recovery journey and my father's life taught me, and for what this field still owes Indigenous people.

Longitudinal Studies That Follow Recovery over Time

One key limitation of this study is that it captured each participant's story at only one point in time. A conversation, no matter how rich, is like a snapshot. Recovery, on the other hand, is a continuous journey. One participant described her sobriety as a daily decision, a

process of checking in with herself every morning and choosing one more day. Another explained that becoming an Elder happened gradually over years of language work and building relational accountability with her community. These are stories that a single interview cannot fully encompass. Future researchers should design longitudinal studies that follow participants over months and years, observing how the connection between cultural reconnection and recovery evolves, deepens, or shifts over time (Archibald, 2008; Kovach, 2019).

Longitudinal work of this kind would also allow researchers to observe how healing moves through families across generations. One participant described her granddaughter's honest observation as a turning point in her own recovery. Another traced her anxiety and her drinking back to her mother's postpartum hospitalization when she was a newborn. The intergenerational transmission of both trauma and healing is one of the most important dynamics this study reveals, yet it remains one of the least studied. Brave Heart (2003) and Evans-Campbell (2008) have built foundational frameworks for understanding historical trauma across generations, but research that follows specific family systems over time, tracking how one person's recovery reshapes the relational patterns around them, would extend that foundation in ways the field urgently needs (Gone et al., 2019).

Research That Centers Indigenous Men and Two-Spirit Individuals

This study gathered the stories of four Indigenous women, one Indigenous man, and my own story as a Northern Ute woman. The women's voices are rich and carry enormous insight. They are also the voices most consistently represented in qualitative research on Indigenous recovery. Indigenous men, and particularly Indigenous men in active or recent addiction, remain significantly underrepresented in this area of scholarship. My brother's story sits at the edge of this dissertation, present but unreachable in the way that someone still inside their addiction is

always just outside the frame. He is an extraordinary writer with a profound capacity for reflection, and his struggle with alcohol and substance use disorder continues. His story is one I carry with me every day, and it is also one the field has largely failed to study with the depth it deserves (Evans-Campbell, 2008; Gone et al., 2019).

Two-Spirit individuals face compounded forms of disconnection, navigating both colonial disruptions to cultural identity and the ongoing violence of cisnormativity and heteronormativity within and outside their communities. Research on addiction and recovery that centers Two-Spirit experiences is sparse, and the frameworks for understanding healing that emerge from Two-Spirit knowledge systems carry teachings that the broader field of Indigenous wellness research has not yet adequately engaged. Future studies should be designed with and led by Two-Spirit researchers and community members, using methodological frameworks that honor the relational complexity of Two-Spirit identity rather than grafting Two-Spirit experience onto frameworks built for cisgender participants (Pihama, 2020; Simpson, 2017).

Urban Indigenous Communities and the Question of Belonging without Land

Several participants in this study navigated addiction and recovery in contexts where their connection to their ancestral lands was disrupted, distant, or contested. One participant grew up moving between her mother's home and her father's reservation during the summers, carrying two worlds inside her body and belonging fully to neither. Another was questioned by peers about whether she was really Native because she was not from their specific tribe. These experiences of fractured belonging and contested identity are especially acute for Indigenous people living in urban settings, far from their home communities and their ceremonial lands. Yet urban Indigenous people represent a significant and growing portion of the Indigenous population in the United States, and their experiences with addiction and recovery remain

understudied relative to reservation-based communities (Evans-Campbell, 2008; Smye et al., 2023).

Future research should investigate how land-based healing frameworks, including the cottonwood framework developed in this dissertation, can be adapted for urban contexts where the land itself is inaccessible or transformed beyond recognition. Johnson-Jennings et al. (2020) demonstrate that land-based interventions produce measurable improvements in substance use outcomes, but their work is primarily situated in contexts where tribal lands are accessible. Researchers working in urban Indigenous communities should explore what land-based healing looks like when the land is a park, a river corridor, or a memory carried in the body rather than a place that can be physically walked. Redvers (2020) suggests that the connection to land is fundamentally relational rather than merely geographic, which opens possibilities for land-based healing practices in urban settings that future research has yet to fully explore.

Visual Art and Embodied Methods as Primary Research Tools

This dissertation incorporates visual art as both data and method, drawing on the beadwork, digital collage, and photography that the participants and I created as part of the research process. One participant's recovery journey was depicted in a visual timeline generated through NotebookLM that mapped the movement from normalization and active addiction through compliance and early treatment to long-term recovery through prayer and language. These visual representations revealed dimensions of the recovery journey that interview transcripts alone could not convey. Motta-Ochoa et al. (2024) identify art-based interventions for Indigenous people as an emerging and significantly underdeveloped area of research. The evidence base for visual and embodied methods in Indigenous addiction research is growing, but it remains thin relative to the richness of what these methods can hold.

Future researchers should invest in studies that position visual art, beadwork, photography, land-based creative practice, and digital storytelling as primary research tools rather than supplementary ones. Boivin (2018) demonstrates how image-based storytelling can carry narrative dimensions of family history and cultural identity that resist reduction to verbal language. Christian and Wong (2017) explore how visual sovereignty through filmmaking becomes a method of cultural reclamation. These approaches align with the principles of Indigenous Storywork because they honor the full range of ways that knowledge is carried and communicated, including through the hands, through materials, through color and composition, and through the silence between images (Archibald, 2008; Phillips & Bunda, 2018). A research design that centers these methods from the outset, rather than adding them to a primarily interview-based study, would capture dimensions of experience that this dissertation has only begun to open.

Community-Based and Tribally Controlled Research Designs

This study was conducted by a Northern Ute researcher working within her own community and associated communities. That insider position is a strength. It also highlights that the most effective future research in this area will be conducted by tribal communities themselves, owned, directed, and governed by them. The history of extractive research in Indigenous communities, in which outside researchers have arrived, collected stories, published findings, and left without meaningful engagement with the communities that provided the data, has understandably engendered wariness toward academic research (Smith, 2021; Tuck & Yang, 2014). Future researchers must work within tribally controlled research frameworks that involve communities as co-investigators and as the primary holders of the findings.

This means building structures for community ownership of data, for findings to be returned in forms usable by the community rather than legible only to the academy, and for the research itself to generate something of practical value to the people whose stories made it possible. LaFrance and Nichols (2009) outline an Indigenous evaluation framework grounded in telling our story in our own place and time, a framework that insists community benefit is built into the design rather than added afterward. Wilson (2008) argues that research is ceremony, which means it carries obligations to the relational web within which it occurs. Future studies that take those obligations seriously from the beginning will produce findings that are more trustworthy, more sustainable, and more genuinely useful to the communities they are meant to serve.

The Role of Language Revitalization in Long-Term Recovery

One of the most powerful findings in this study is the relationship between language revitalization and sustained sobriety. One participant described her return to her Indigenous language as inseparable from her recovery, creating songs and educational games to teach children the words her ancestors used, and finding in that act of transmission a form of healing that no clinical program had been able to provide. Kirmayer et al. (2011) identify language as a repository of cultural knowledge and describe language revitalization as a direct act of cultural continuity that builds resilience. Simpson (2014) argues that language is the carrier of land-based intelligence; to lose a language is to lose a way of being in relationship with the land itself. Yet the specific mechanisms by which language revitalization supports recovery, and the conditions under which it does so most effectively, remain largely unexamined in the empirical literature.

Future research should investigate the relationships among language learning, language teaching, and addiction recovery outcomes in Indigenous communities across diverse linguistic

and geographic contexts. Studies that follow language learners and language teachers over time, examining how their relationship to sobriety, community, and cultural identity shifts as their relationship to their language deepens, would contribute something genuinely new to the field. This work should be designed in partnership with language revitalization programs already operating within tribal communities, so that the research supports rather than disrupts the work already being done. Conrad and Hardison-Stevens (2023) demonstrate how Native knowledge systems and sovereignty curriculum can reshape educational practice when Indigenous languages and land-based teachings are centered. Similar work needs to happen at the intersection of language revitalization and substance use recovery.

Intergenerational Healing and the Study of Recovery within Families

My father did not survive his addiction. My sister found her way through hers. My brother is still searching. These three lives exist within the same family, shaped by the same childhood, the same land, the same inherited silence, and yet they have moved through addiction in profoundly different ways. One of the questions I carry out of this dissertation and into whatever comes next is this: What makes healing possible for one family member and out of reach for another, and what can research do to help close that gap?

Future studies should examine recovery as a family and community phenomenon rather than an individual one. Methot (2019) argues that trauma is stored in the body and transmitted through relationship, which means healing also travels that way. Research that follows multiple members of the same family across time, tracking how one person's recovery reshapes the dynamics around them, and how those shifts create new possibilities or new pressures for others, would produce knowledge that clinical practice and policy have not yet had access to. This kind of study requires deep trust, long timelines, and rigorous ethical commitments to all family

members, not just the primary participant. It also requires a methodological framework that can hold the complexity of family systems, including love, grief, ambivalence, and silence that shape every household touched by addiction (Duran, 2006; Linklater, 2014; Knott, 2019).

Spirituality, Ceremony, and the Measurement Problem

One participant described her sobriety as beginning in a sweat lodge during an eclipse, feeling her addiction cross to the other side. Another described the teaching that a hangover is your soul leaving you as the insight that finally gave her language for what she had been experiencing for decades. These are spiritual experiences. They are also recovery experiences. The research literature on Indigenous healing has increasingly acknowledged the therapeutic significance of ceremony, prayer, and spiritual practice in addiction recovery (Gone, 2013; Hai et al., 2021; McCormick, 2000; Rowan et al., 2014). What it has struggled to do is study these experiences in ways that honor their sacred dimensions without reducing them to measurable variables or stripping them of their relational and ceremonial context.

Future research should grapple honestly with the measurement problem in spiritual healing. Kawagley (1995) describes a tetrahedral relationship among the human, natural, and spirit worlds, in which transformation in one domain produces transformation in others. Napoleon (2013) locates healing within Indigenous legal orders embedded in ceremony and story. These are epistemological frameworks that require different research tools than those Western social science currently offers. Researchers willing to work at this intersection should engage with Indigenous philosophers, Elders, and ceremonial knowledge holders as intellectual partners from the beginning, not as cultural informants at the margins of a study designed elsewhere. They should also be honest about the limits of academic methods and resist the

pressure to translate sacred knowledge into forms the academy finds legible but that Indigenous communities find extractive (Ermine, 2007; Smith, 2021; Wilson, 2008).

A Final Word to the Next Researcher

I close these recommendations the way I began this dissertation - in relationship. If you are reading this because you are preparing to do research in this area, I want to speak to you directly. The people whose stories I carried in this study trusted me with something irreplaceable. They gave me grief, and memory, and laughter, and the specific texture of survival in each of their voices. That trust was given to me because I came to them as a community member and as a person who carries my own story of addiction in my family, in my body, and in the land where I grew up. I do not know who you are or where you come from. I do know that the work ahead requires you to show up in relationship, to locate yourself honestly within the question you are asking, and to understand that you will not be able to study this from the outside (Archibald, 2008; Wilson, 2008; Kovach, 2009).

As Tuck (2009) argues, communities that have already endured enormous harm do not need more research documenting their harm. What they need is research that begins from a place of desire, from a belief in what is possible, from a commitment to return something of genuine value. As King (2003) reminds us, the truth about stories is that that is all we are. The next researcher who takes up this work will be entering a story already in motion, one that belongs to the people who lived it. Go in with humility. Go in with accountability. Go in ready to be changed by what you hear.

Final Reflection- Closing the Circle

I would like to tell you one more story before I close this circle.

In the early whispers of spring, when I was a child of seven or eight, I stood at the edge of the park, where the ground stayed cool beneath my little feet, and the grass hesitated, caught in the dance between the vibrant life of summer and the stillness of winter. The air held a unique scent, elusive, one I've never managed to capture with words. It was neither the rich aroma of earth nor the crispness of fading frost; rather, it was an in-between essence, a fragrance of transformation, of something quietly becoming.

The Cottonwood trees lined the fence like sentinels, their tips swelling with expectation as the season stirred. The buds, full and resinous, glowed with a soft hint of gold, whispering promises of warmth to come. I remember the thrill of plucking one, pressing it between my fingers, and bringing it to my nose. The scent wrapped around me, faintly medicinal, like the gentle touch of a healer; it carried the weight of beginnings, a reassurance that life would soon burst forth anew. Little did I know then, the things I would come to understand and feel as the years unfolded.

Something is always coming back to life.

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As spring is now here, unveiling its vibrant beauty, I stand beneath the cherished tree, feeling a profound transformation within, a deep pulse resonating through my soul, reminding me of our connections with nature and one another.

Love for our Father

Near the end of my research, I received a message from LaDean. She expressed her love for her father and shared that she had forgiven him. I contemplated her words for a long time, holding them delicately as if they were something fragile yet stronger than they appeared. I understood the depth of her message; it wasn't just about the simple act of forgiveness but the

profound journey it represented. I recognized the years of confusion that likely led her to this point, the grief that must have been fully felt before her forgiveness could become genuine rather than performative. There is a unique loneliness in loving someone who failed to protect you, an ache in yearning for a father who was both present and absent, who belonged to you yet always seemed just out of reach. I felt a similar love for my own father, too.

I want that to be part of the record. I want it said clearly, not buried in clinical language or softened into something more academically comfortable. This entire dissertation has been, in ways I am only now fully willing to name, a love letter written in the language of research. It has been my attempt to understand the man who shaped me, the addiction that shaped him, and the long intergenerational current that moved through our family—like water flowing through the root systems of trees, finding every crack, following every fault line, carrying both nourishment and damage in the same quiet stream.

I did not set out to forgive anyone when I started this work. I set out to *understand*. But I have realized, somewhere in the long space between the literature review and this final section, that understanding and forgiveness are not so far apart. That is when you truly see the forces that shaped a person, the unhealed wounds they carried, the losses they had no words for, the ways that trauma, shame, and silence accumulated across generations before arriving, concentrated and unnamed, in a single human life, something inside you begins to soften. Not without complexity. Not without grief. But it softens. He was trying, in the only ways he knew how.

That matters to me. It will always matter to me.

Closing the Circle

The Cottonwood is still standing. I know this the same way I understand things I haven't seen but still feel deeply inside me. There's a tree at Red Bridge, or one very similar, part of a

lineage of trees that learn from their mothers. These trees extend their roots toward unseen water, needing no one's acknowledgment, and that tree remains standing strong.

Science has now confirmed what Indigenous knowledge has long understood - trees don't exist in isolation. Healing also does not happen alone. Beneath the surface, mycelium connects the roots of both thriving and struggling plants, nourishing them all. I believe our memories work similarly. Our stories are not isolated events hidden away in separate corners; they are interconnected, reaching out to one another even in darkness. The story I carry is linked to the experiences of women, and together they intersect with the experiences of every woman involved in this study, as well as the stories of daughters, fathers, Cottonwood trees, and the springs that continue to flow, even when we are uncertain they will.

Closing this circle means that I carry these stories with me now, honoring those who survived and those who continue to search for their way home. This project was not just an academic exercise; it was a reckoning and a return. It involved revisiting the part of myself where the child still stood at the fence line, unaware of what she was truly learning. Finally, I turned to face her and said, "I see you. I understand what you were holding. You were not alone in this, and you do not have to bear it all anymore."

With newfound clarity and deep reverence, I hold the hope that sharing these truths creates a pathway toward healing for our families and our communities, lighting the way for those still searching for their own way home. Healing begins through remembering. And remembering, I have learned, is never only ours. When one of us returns, we help make it a little safer for the next person to follow. In our small and imperfect way, we become like a mother tree, sending nourishment through the darkness to those we may never even meet.

That is enough. That is more than enough.

Closing Prayer

And so, I end here, the way that the Elder taught me to end. I go outside, in my mind if not always in my body, and I find the tree. I place the tobacco at its base, at that quiet threshold where bark becomes root and root becomes earth and earth becomes everything, and I speak honestly to whatever is listening, to the spirits, to the ancestors, to the women whose stories live in these pages, to the fathers we loved and the children we once were.

I am grateful for this work.

I am grateful to those who trusted me with their truth.

I am grateful for the understanding that came slowly, in pieces, the way spring always comes, incrementally and then all at once.

I ask that what was shared here travels in a good way. That it finds the people who need it. That it opens something in the reader the way it opened something in me. That our families, our communities, our children who are still small and still learning what the world is, might inherit something lighter than what we were given.

I ask that the stories we told together do not stop with us.

I ask for healing. For the ones still inside it. For the ones just beginning to find their way out. For the ones who loved their fathers and didn't have the words for it.

I put the tobacco down.

The circle is closed.

Turgruyahk. Thank you. It is enough. It is good.

"The goal of Indigenous Storywork is not to arrive at conclusions but to deepen our relationship with questions that matter, questions about belonging, about healing, about what we owe the

stories that have shaped us."

— To Archibald (2008), and a lifetime of learning what she meant.

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Appendix A

Requesting Participation Letter

Valentina R. Sireech
Doctoral Candidate, Ed. D. in Educational Leadership
University of Washington Tacoma
P.O. Box 386, Myton, Utah 84052 vsireech@uw.edu
(435) 823-3749

Date: XXXX, 2025

Dear Relative,

I invite you to participate in my research project for my doctoral studies at the University of Washington, Tacoma. My dissertation, titled "Where the Roots Remember: Reclaiming Addiction Recovery Indigenous Epistemology and Storywork; *A Personal Journey into Land, Memory, and Visual Narratives as Pathways to Healing,"* explores themes of addiction, disconnection, and healing through the lens of Indigenous knowledge and storytelling.
This project values Indigenous voices and emphasizes respect and connection. I invite you to share your stories or thoughts on healing, recovery, and connection to the land in a relaxed and informal setting. You can participate by storytelling, reflecting, or responding to visual artwork.

Your participation is voluntary. You can choose to stay anonymous or share your name. You can also review how your contributions are presented before making them public. This ensures that your voice and experiences are respected throughout the process.

This project is not just academic; it focuses on remembering, connecting with the land, and thoughtfully sharing stories. I would be grateful if you could talk with me if you are interested in participating or want more information before deciding.

Feel free to contact me directly if you have questions, want to meet, or would like to discuss how you might contribute.

With gratitude, Turgruyahk

Valentina R. Sireech
Doctoral Candidate, Ed.D. Program
University of Washington Tacoma

Appendix B

Consent Document

Project Title*:*
Where The Roots Remember: Reclaiming Addiction Recovery Indigenous Epistemology and Storywork; *A Personal Journey into Land, Memory, and Visual Narratives as Pathways to Healing.*

Researcher: Valentina R. Sireech
Doctoral Candidate, Ed.D Program
University of Washington Tacoma
vsireech@uw.edu
(435) 823-3749

Invitation and Purpose
You are invited to participate in a research project focused on Indigenous ways of knowing, healing, and storytelling. We will examine how stories, art, and memories connected to the land can help us understand substance use disorder as a form of disconnection. We will also explore how healing occurs through reconnecting with land, culture, and community. Your participation may include sharing personal stories, cultural teachings, or thoughts on healing. Together, we will reflect on memory, survival, and how stories can guide us back to ourselves and our communities.

What Participation Involves

- Participation is entirely voluntary and depends on your comfort level. You can choose how you want to share your thoughts—whether through conversation, responding to art, or storytelling.
- You can have these conversations in person, by phone, on video calls, or in any way that works for you.
- If you agree, we may record our conversations for accuracy and reflection.
- Before we publish or share anything publicly, you will have the chance to review how your words or ideas are represented in the final project.
- You can decide to be named, use a fake name, or stay anonymous.
- You have the right to withdraw from the project without any consequences.

Risks and Benefits
Participating in this project involves minimal risks. Some conversations might evoke strong emotions or memories, but you are not required to share anything that makes you uncomfortable. You can pause or stop at any time. Your knowledge and story can help others better understand healing and addiction in Indigenous communities. We will handle sharing this work with care and ensure it is returned to the community in meaningful ways.

Confidentiality and Use of Your Story
Your story, insights, and reflections will stay confidential and be respected. You have full control over how we use your contributions, and we will check in with you about your preferences throughout the process. We will store recordings and notes securely; only the researcher can access them.

Return of Knowledge
A vital part of this project is sharing knowledge with the people and land it originates from. After completing the research, I will share what has been created through art, writing, and community events or exhibits. You will be invited to receive and respond to this sharing.

Consent
Please review the options below and initial your choices:

- ___ I agree to participate in this project and understand the purpose and process
- ___ I agree to being audio recorded
- ___ I would like to be named in the project
- ___ I prefer to stay anonymous or use a fake name.
- ___ I would like to review how my story is represented before final submission
- ___ I understand that I may withdraw at any time without consequence

Participant Name (printed): ____
Participant Signature: __________________________ **Date**: _____________
Researcher Signature: __________________________ **Date**: _____________

Appendix C

Interview Protocol

Researcher: Valentina R. Sireech
Project Title: Where the Roots Remember: Reclaiming Addiction Recovery Indigenous Epistemology and Storywork; *A Personal Journey into Land, Memory, and Visual Narratives as Pathways to Healing.*

Methodological Framework: Indigenous Storywork, & Visual Art Narrative
Purpose: To examine how Indigenous stories, memory, land, and visual art create space to understand substance use disorder as disconnection and healing as reconnection.

Time of interview: ___________________________________

Date of interview: ___________________________________

Location: ___________________________________

Interviewer: ___________________________________

Interviewee: ___________________________________

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. I would like to record our interview to ensure accuracy. Please let me know at any time if you want me to turn off the recorder.
Relational Framing & Opening the Space
Before beginning, I will smudge (if culturally appropriate and agreed upon) and take a moment to ground the space in intention, gratitude, and respect.
I will begin by affirming the following:

- Participation is voluntary and can stop at any point.
- You are welcome to share only what feels right.
- Your story is yours—you guide the flow.
- I may take notes or audio record if permission is granted.
- We are in a shared space of learning and healing. I am here to listen with my whole being.

Core Relational Questions

(*These are open-ended prompts, not rigid questions. The order and language will shift naturally in conversation.*)

Kinship & Land

1. What does healing mean to you, or what has it looked like in your life or family?

2. Can you share a memory connected to the land that has stayed with you or helped you through a difficult time?
3. How do you think place or land shows up in our stories, especially regarding struggle, survival, or healing?

Memory & Disconnection

4. Are there stories or moments in your life where you felt disconnected from family, land, culture, or yourself?
5. What helped you remember who you are, or return to something that felt true?

Addiction & Healing

6. What teachings or experiences have shaped how you understand addiction in individuals and the community?
7. In your experience, what gets in the way of healing in our communities? What supports it?
8. How have cultural teachings, ceremonies, or communities been part of your healing or those of someone close to you?

Story & Visual Meaning

9. What do you feel or notice when you look at the visual artwork or collage?
10. When you see these images or hear about the project, is there a story that comes forward for you?
11. What would it include if you could create an image or story that holds healing?

Closing the Circle

To honor closure and reciprocity, I will offer:

- A moment to reflect on what came up
- The opportunity to share anything that was not asked but feels important
- A thank-you gift (if appropriate)
- An invitation to review how your story is represented before it is shared
- A reminder that you can reach out at any time if you want to add, change, or withdraw anything shared

Closing Prompt:

"What would you like future generations to know about healing, survival, or the strength of our stories?"

Thank you for participating in this interview. May I contact you for a follow-up interview or to clarify some of your responses if necessary?

Appendix D

Transcriptionist Confidentiality Agreement

Project Title: Where the Roots Remember: Reclaiming Addiction Recovery through Indigenous Epistemology and Storywork; *A Personal Journey into Land, Memory, and Visual Art Narratives as Pathways to Healing.*

Researcher: Valentina R. Sireech, Doctoral Candidate
Institution: University of Washington Tacoma, Ed. D. Program
As a transcriptionist working with audio recordings and sensitive content from the research project, you will handle personal stories, cultural teachings, and reflections from Indigenous community members, Elders, and individuals in recovery. These stories are sacred and require careful attention, respect, and confidentiality.
By signing this form, you agree to the following:

1. **Confidentiality and Privacy**
    - I will not share, discuss, or disclose any content, names, or details from the recordings or transcripts with anyone other than the researcher (Valentina R. Sireech).
    - During transcription, I will keep all materials—including audio files, transcripts, and related notes—secure and protected.
2. **Cultural Sensitivity**
    - I acknowledge that these stories may include ceremonial knowledge, emotional memory, or culturally specific information.
    - I will treat all content with the same respect I would give to a relative sharing something sacred.
3. **Data Handling**
    - I will delete all audio files, transcripts, and related documents from my devices and email once the transcription is completed and confirmed by the researcher.
    - I will not retain any copies in digital or printed form.
4. **Responsibility and Accountability**
    - I understand that my role is part of a more extensive process of Indigenous research grounded in relational accountability and ethical storytelling.
    - If I encounter content I do not understand or am unsure how to transcribe respectfully, I will communicate directly with the researcher for guidance.

I agree to the terms above and understand my responsibility in working with these stories.

Name (Print): ____

Signature: ____

Date: _______________

Researcher Signature: ________________________________

Date: _______________

Contact for Questions:

Valentina R. Sireech
vsireech@uw.edu
(435) 823-3749

Appendix E

Photo Release Forms

PHOTO, STORY, AND ARTWORK RELEASE FORM
Project Title: Where the Roots Remember: Reclaiming Addiction Recovery Indigenous Epistemology and Storywork; *A Personal Journey into Land, Memory, and Visual Art Narratives as Pathways to Healing.*
Researcher:
Valentina R. Sireech, MFA, LSUDC
Northern Ute Tribe – Uncompahgre Band
Consent:
By signing below, I agree that Valentina R. Sireech can use my photograph, story, and/or artwork in her dissertation, community presentations, visual exhibits, and educational materials.

- I understand participation is voluntary, and I can withdraw consent at any time before the project is finalized.
- I choose whether I want to be identified by name, remain anonymous, or use a pseudonym.
- I will have the opportunity to review how my contribution is shared if I wish.

Please check your preference:
[ ] I allow my photograph to be used and identified by my name.
[ ] I allow my photograph to be used anonymously or with a pseudonym.
[ ] I allow my story and/or artwork to be used and identified by my name.
[ ] I allow my story and/or artwork to be used anonymously or with a pseudonym.
Preferred Name or Pseudonym: ____
Signatures:
Participant Name (printed): ____
Participant Signature: ____
Date: ____
Researcher Signature: ____
Date: ____

Appendix F

Potential Emotional Triggers and Unforeseeable Risks

Participating in this project may involve:

- Revisiting painful memories related to substance use, loss, trauma, or disconnection from family or culture.
- Emotional distress related to intergenerational trauma or personal struggles with healing and recovery.
- Feelings of vulnerability while sharing sacred or private experiences.
- Unintended recall of childhood or community events that may be unresolved or suppressed.

These emotional responses are valid and should be honored with care. You are encouraged to share only what feels safe and meaningful to you.

Supportive Resources
If you experience emotional distress during or after participation, the following resources are available to support your well-being:

Local & Cultural Support

- **Ute Indian Tribe ASAPP Prevention Program**– (435) 722-3234

Outpatient Treatment Center and Trauma Group Therapy, and licensed clinical support.

- **Ute Indian Tribe Victim Services** – (435) 725-2825
  Crisis support, advocacy, and community resources.
- **Red Pine Recovery Center (Fort Duchesne, UT)** – (435) 722-9935
  Inpatient Treatment Center and AA/NA meetings.

Crisis and Mental Health Hotlines

- **988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline** – Call or Text **988** (24/7, Free & Confidential)
- **SAMHSA National Helpline** – 1-800-662-HELP (4357)
  Substance use and mental health treatment referral service.

Spiritual and Ceremonial Support

- You can bring a trusted Elder, spiritual advisor, or cultural helper to any storytelling space. Smudging, prayer, or other cultural practices may be used to support well-being and grounding.

Your Safety and Well-being Matter
Please speak with me anytime if you need a break, cultural support, or want to discuss concerns. Your participation is deeply valued, and your well-being is my priority.

I have read and understand the potential risks of participation, and I have been offered support resources:
Participant Name (printed): ________________________________
Participant Signature: _______________________ Date: __________
Researcher Signature: ________________________ Date: __________