STORYING URBAN INDIGENEITY IN THE RUSSIAN FAR EAST: EVENY AND EVENKI WOMEN NAVIGATING YAKUTSK, SAKHA REPUBLIC

by

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Abstract

Federal laws in the Russian Federation set out restrictive criteria for Indigenous peoples to be recognized politically, socially, and culturally as Indigenous Small Numbered Peoples of the north (*KMNS*). These criteria emphasize "traditionality," a strategic tactic equating indigeneity with rural landscapes and thus discounting urban Indigenous individuals and communities as modern political and self-determining subjects. Stories from Indigenous women living in Yakutsk, the capital city of Sakha Republic (Yakutia) challenge these narratives by reconstituting the urban landscape from an Indigenous perspective. The challenges emanating from urban landscapes, and relationships integral to navigating these challenges, are examined in this thesis from a critical Indigenous feminist geographical framework, honouring and celebrating the numerous manifestations of urban indigeneity entangled throughout Yakutsk.

Table of Contents

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This work represents one of many steps in my lifelong commitment to building bridges between and celebrating the diverse stories from Indigenous women navigating cities around the world and the challenges/opportunities created by urbanization. Thank you to all the women along my journey who have believed in me, and who see themselves reflected in this work. You inspire me endlessly. Marsii.

Table of Figures

Chapter 1: Introduction

Political, social, and cultural understandings of the Russian Far East in white-Euro-heteropatriarchal-privileging structures and discourses of power are shaped by sensationalized media portrayals, historically reminiscent imaginings, and homogenized narratives of Russian culture and peoples. Upon closer inquiry, however, realities of Russian spatialities and relationalities are quickly revealed, the people substantiating them are multifaceted, and the complex relationalities forming the Russian Federation, the largest country in the world, are illuminated. The lack of awareness and attention paid to Indigenous peoples in these landscapes are exposed, and compassionate engagement by researchers poised to advocate for their inclusion in global discourse becomes invaluable to local communities. It is the responsibility of researchers from privileged positions to encourage nuanced and intentional understandings of how global forces such as capitalism, colonialism, and gender violence are impacting Indigenous communities beyond narrow imaginations of places like the Russian Far East.

This project developed and draws inspiration from intersecting personal, political, and academic motivations. The project's goal is to interject into static and intransigent discourses about Indigenous women and their relationships to urban place. My sense of belonging to and understanding of the social, political, and cultural nuances of the urban Indigenous community on unceded xʷməθkwəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxw 7mesh (Squamish), and Sə̓l lwətaʔ/Selilwitulh (Tsleil-Waututh) territories (Vancouver, BC) was a catalyst for expanding relations to and understandings of urban indigeneity on an international scale. Transitioning from Wet'suwet'en territories to unceded Coast Salish territories at 18 to pursue education in the city introduced me to the responsibilities inherent in this liminal space I would

become so familiar with that challenged the rigid perceptions of the binary between urban and rural. I became familiar with how many of my own community members embodied the woven assemblages of urban indigeneity without ever compromising or renouncing their ways of life and knowledge that stemmed from the land. Undertaking this work as a Cree-Metis woman (with personal experience transitioning between Indigenous communities I call 'home' and navigating diverse challenges as I adapted) framed the approach, expectations, and goals for the project. These intergenerational intellectual traditions and cultural knowledge have been passed down from my great-grandmother, to my grandfather, and from my mother to me, guiding my own identity formation and perspective on the world as a Cree-Metis woman with mobility and innovative relationality in my every breath.

Research about Indigenous peoples in Sakha Republic (Yakutia), and Russia expansively, does not for the most part and at present consider how cities and urban dynamics impact contemporary Indigenous identities. This is due to narrow perceptions in Russia about indigeneity embodying and depicting 'traditionality' isolated from the pace and lifestyles of modern, globalized societies. Settler-state positionings of Indigenous peoples as incompatible with cities, contemporary ambitions, and indefinite self-determination are increasingly critically evaluated and challenged by Indigenous peoples experiencing these realities. The goals of this research are to acknowledge and celebrate the multifaceted experiences, struggles, and ambitions of Eveny and Evenki women in Yakutsk, the capital city of Sakha Republic (Yakutia). My research questions were developed to honour the specific geopolitical nuances of how urban Indigenous women experience, cultivate, and perceive indigeneity in conversations with and beyond restrictive Russian legal and political definitions. By illuminating the realities of Indigenous women's entanglements with urbanization,

globalization, and colonialism in the Russian Far East, this research challenges the constrictions placed on the flourishing indigenous present and futures by legal criteria set forth by Russian laws.

Upon arriving to Yakutsk, Russia in May 2018, my research questions and conceptualizations rapidly shifted to reflect the needs, expectations, and realities of the community members I was working alongside. The lens through which I gazed and the approach to research I took shifted though ongoing development of relational responsibilities that allowed meaningful relationships to develop between myself, the city, the people, and the stories we shared. The foundations of this thesis are woven together by these relationships developed to explore the nuances and meanings of Eveny and Evenki women living, navigating, and interacting in the capital city of Sakha Republic (Yakutia).

1.1 Research Questions

This research sought to answer two interrelated questions about urban Indigenous women's stories, experiences, and relationships in Yakutsk.

1. How do *KMNS* (Indigenous Small Numbered Peoples of the North) women express, cultivate, and perceive urban indigeneity?
2. How do stories from Evenki and Eveny women in Yakutsk expose the limitations of Russian laws and political discourse on Indigenous peoples, that, in order to preserve a narrow and specific type of indigeneity, neglect to consider the impacts of globalization and urbanization on Indigenous communities?

1.2 Background/Historical Context

This section establishes important historical context for the ideas and findings contained throughout this thesis. I first introduce the Indigenous Small Numbered Peoples (*KMNS*) in Russia and their historical encounters with state mechanisms of control. I then reflect on the current gap in English literature on Indigenous women in Russia. Following this, I geographically situate this work in Sakha Republic (Yakutia), and in its capital city of Yakutsk more specifically. An overview of colonial forces that impacted and shaped indigeneity from the Soviet Union era to modern times subsequently contextualizes current landscapes of indigeneity. A brief overview of the Sakha people, who are not considered Indigenous by Russian legal criteria but do meet international criteria for recognition as Indigenous peoples follows as inter-indigenous relations in Yakutsk are a central theme to the third chapter. Relations and tensions between Indigenous Small Numbered Peoples (*KMNS*) and Sakha people are briefly considered at the end of this section, followed by relevant reflections on the presence of Indigenous peoples in Yakutsk.

1.2.1 Indigeneity in Russia

Roughly 0.2% of the Russian population has been legally categorized as northern 'Indigenous' people, with 40 distinct Indigenous Small Numbered nations in the Russian North, Siberia, and the Far East known as *KMNS* (*korennye malochislennye narody severa*)[1] (Yakovleva, 2011; Kryazhkov, 2013). Three federal laws set out the criteria Indigenous peoples must meet in order to be recognized as *KMNS*: Russian Federation Federal Law No.82 (On The Guarantees Of The Rights Of The Indigenous Small-Numbered Peoples Of The

[1] For the purposes of this thesis, Indigenous Small Numbered Peoples (*KMNS*) will be referred to as Indigenous peoples with other nations identified according to their specific name.

Russian Federation)[2]; RFFL No.104 (On General Principles Of Organization The Indigenous Small-Numbered Peoples' Communities Of The North, Siberia And Far East Of The Russian Federation)[3]; and RFFL No.49 (On Territories Of Traditional Land Use Of The Indigenous Small-Numbered Peoples Of The North, Siberia And The Far East Of The Russian Federation)[4]. These laws define *KMNS* as

> …peoples living in the territories of traditional settlement of their ancestors, preserving a traditional way of life and a traditional economic system and economic activities, numbering within the Russian Federation fewer than 50,000 persons, and recognizing themselves as independent ethnic communities. (Donahoe et al., 2008, p.994)

The prominence of "traditionality" in this definition has significant implications for Indigenous ways of life, economic practices, and cultural expressions in the eyes of the Russian state and, subsequently, resource allocation or protections from encroaching developments in Indigenous territories. At the behest of the Russian state, Indigenous nations who suitably perform "traditionality" receive special rights, privileges, and state protections (Kryazhkov, 2013). Indigenous nations that meet these criterions, however, have inherent Indigenous rights as recognized by international law that do not depend on 'traditionality'. Balzer (2016) poignantly argues that traditionality, as emphasised by the Russian state, is designed to restrict the number of Indigenous peoples able to claim recognition and associated protections or benefits, and gradually reduce this number. Further critical engagement with the Russian conceptualization of tradition is elaborated on in Chapter 2.

This research primarily explores questions about and in partnership with Indigenous women in the north-eastern region of Siberia called Sakha Republic (Yakutia). In this region,

[2] 30 April, 1999
[3] 20 July, 2000
[4] 7 May, 2001

five *KMNS* receive official state recognition – Evenki, Eveny, Yukhagir, Dolgan, and Chukchi. This project specifically explores and addresses stories from Evenki and Eveny women from this region. In addition to Eveny and Evenki women, this research also considers the titular peoples for whom the Republic is named, the Sakha (Yakut) nation. While Sakha receive international recognition as Indigenous people, their population of 466,492 (as of the 2010 Russian census) makes them ineligible for status as Indigenous Small Numbered Peoples (Fondahl, Lazebnik, & Poelzer, 2000).

1.2.2 (English-language) Discourse in Russia Concerned with Indigenous Women

In the Russian Federation, contemporary English-language research focussing on Indigenous women offers insightful perspectives, in contrast to the historic absence of women or gender from political, cultural, and historical analyses of geopolitics, space, and society in the Arctic (Vladimirova & Habeck, 2018). The few writings historically available in English language that paid attention to women focussed primarily on the experiences and ideas of non-Indigenous women (Vinokurova & Boiakova, 2009). Only in recent decades have Indigenous women's stories been included and recognized in academic literature (Rethmann, 2001; Bloch, 2004; Bloch, 2005; Sirina, 2009; Vinokurova & Boiakova, 2009; Sivsteva, 2015). Bloch (2005) emphasizes the significance of Evenki women's perspectives: "given the radical transformation of gender relations for Indigenous Siberians in the 20th century, [sic] Evenk women's narratives provide a powerful means for examining how Indigenous Siberians encountered state power" (p.546). The relevance of Indigenous women's stories and perceptions of relationships between the state and Indigenous communities to Indigenous self-determination is further highlighted by Vinokurova and Boiakova (2009), as they argue that women are "the cornerstone and foundation in a family, community, and kinship" (p.28). The

importance of Indigenous women to relationships and kinships are key themes explored in later chapters.

1.2.3 Sakha Republic (Yakutia)

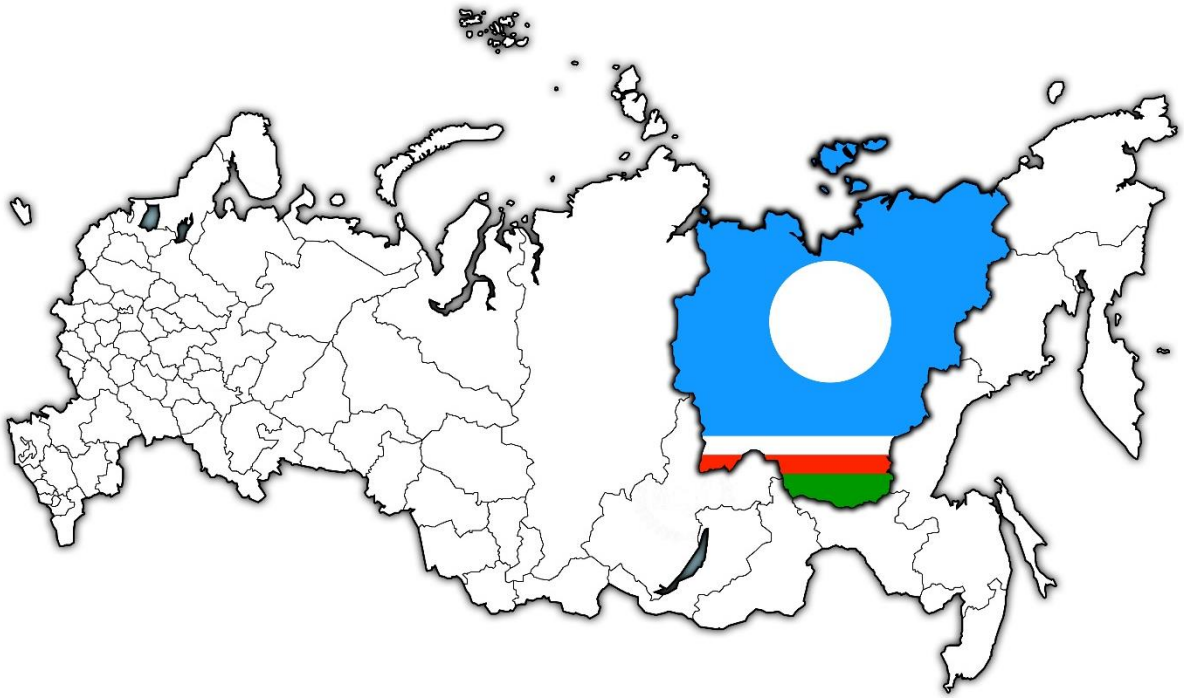

Figure 1.1: Map of Russia with Sakha Republic (Yakutia) identifed by Republic flag (source: Shutterstock)

Sakha Republic (Yakutia) is the largest republic in Russia, as well as one of the largest administrative units in the world (Figure 1.1). It is a highly diverse region, with ethnic demographics differing substantially throughout amongst Russian, Sakha, Indigenous nations, and immigrant diaspora. While ethnic Russians constitute the majority of the current population in some regions, others host a Sakha majority, with Indigenous peoples living amongst these communities throughout the Republic. It is incredibly rich in natural resources, producing almost 100% of Russia's diamonds, 30% of its gold, and other significant resources including gas, oil, coal, and timber (Ventsel, 2018). After the fall of the Soviet Union, Sakha Republic (Yakutia) fought for political and economic control over where the wealth from

resources would be directed, as immense disparities persisted between the resources leaving the Republic and subsidies returning from Moscow. After the republic's declaration of sovereignty in 1990, rather than pursuing separation, it signalled its willingness to work together with Russia by hyphenating its name to 'Yakut-Sakha Republic' (Balzer & Vinokurova, 1996). The legacy of the first president of Sakha Republic (Yakutia), Sakha politician Mikhail Nikolaev, elected in 1991, remains one of resolute advocacy for Sakha resurgence and pride after enduring cultural subjugation and homogenization under the Soviet state. Nikolaev also ensured that Sakha Republic (Yakutia) had a strong state government that could cooperate with but also challenge Moscow's role in extracting and removing resources from the territory (Fondahl, Lazebnik, & Poelzer, 2000). Today, there two governmental domains in Sakha Republic, state and federal. The Sakha Republic State Assembly is called *Il Tumen* which means 'gathering for solidarity' in Sakha language (Balzer & Vinokurova, 1996). Republic government plays an important role in ensuring regional advocacy and Sakha representation in Russian politics. However, the degree of attention paid by Sakha representatives and policies to small-numbered Indigenous issues has been challenged (Ventsel, 2003).

1.2.4 Yakutsk – The City, Its History, Its People

Yakutsk, the capital city of Sakha Republic (Yakutia), is home to more than 1/3 of the population of the region (Figure 1.2). The city sits roughly 450 kilometers south of the Arctic Circle on the banks of the Lena River (Figure 1.3). It serves as the central hub for cultural and political activity, hosting the republic's government and its various institutions, along with prominent theaters, nightclubs and regional broadcasting headquarters (Ventsel, 2018). Russian Cossacks originally established the city as a fort in 1632 (Tichotsky, 2000). Yakutsk

has become commonly known as one of the coldest cities on Earth, with a yearly average temperature of -8C and winter temperatures regularly below -50C. During the summer, however, temperatures can rise to extreme highs, making adaptation and resilience necessary to life in the region and its capital city.

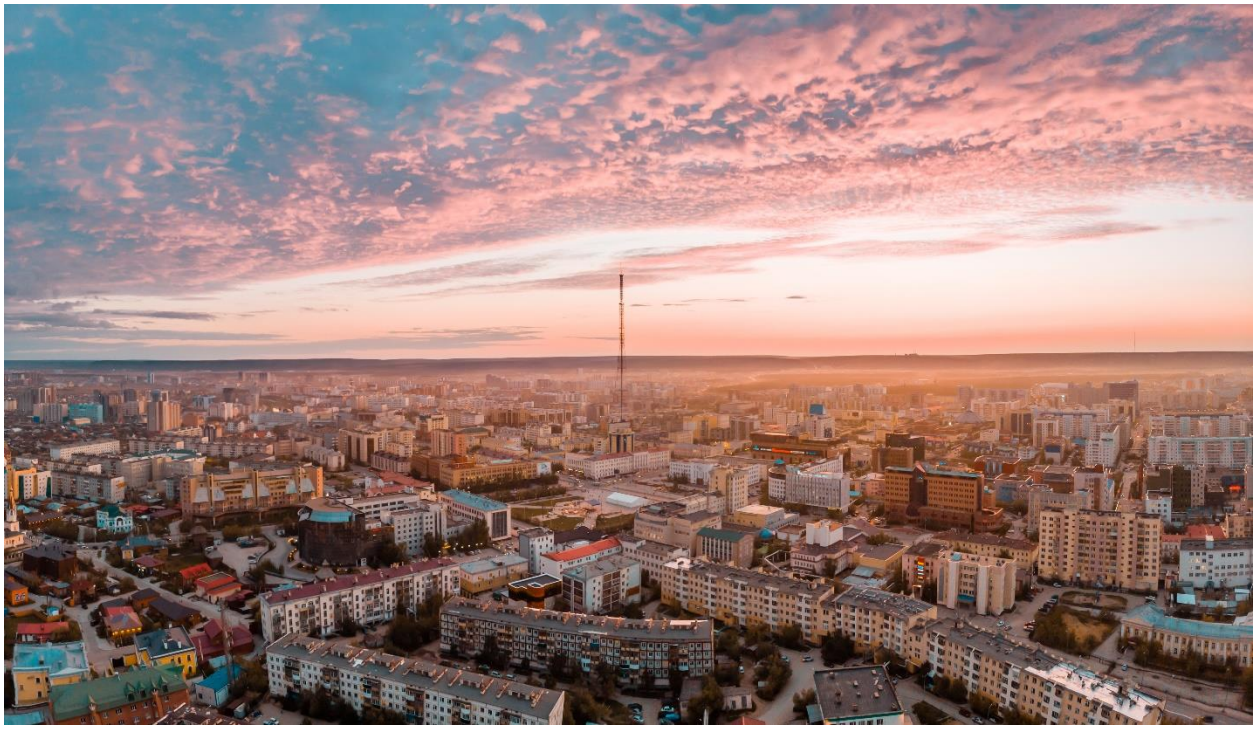

Figure 1.2: Aerial photograph of Yakutsk (Source: Shutterstock)

The population of Yakutsk is rapidly growing as individuals and families are increasingly relocating to the city from villages. Sakha anthropologist Lilia Vinokurova notes the willingness of rural men and women throughout Sakha Republic (Yakutia) for relocating to cities in response to climate change impacting traditional and rural ways of life (Vinokurova, 2017). A demographic review by Popov et al. (2018) notes:

> …from 1990 to 2012 the population in the boundaries of the territory of the city of Yakutsk grew from 191,800 at the beginning of 1990 to 278,400 at the beginning of 2012, or an increase of 68.9%...As of January 1 2012, the population of Yakutsk was 304,500, or 31.9% of the total population of the Republic. (p.1465)

The increasing population of Yakutsk is primarily a result of migration within the republic boundaries, alongside natural population growth, as many individuals and families relocate to the city from villages.

Figure 1.3: Map situating Yakutsk, the capital city of Sakha Republic (Yakutia) (Source: Google Maps)

The city has a history of inter-ethnic tensions, particularly between Russians and Indigenous peoples – Small Numbered and otherwise. An incident in 1986, framed by Russian-language media as a ‘nationalist’ conflict gained notoriety when fighting broke out between Sakha university students and Russian men. Yakutsk became politically polarized over the inter-ethnic nature of the incident, as well as the mishandling of it by the police, which resulted in two girls being injured and a massive street demonstration by several hundred Sakha students three days later. On this incident, Balzer and Vinokurova (1996) write “many students explained the demonstration as an attempt to bring perestroika to their lagging republic. They

resented the failure to arrest Russians involved in the fighting and hoped to call attention to what they perceived as unequal treatment of Russians and Sakha" (p.109). While this incident is a famous example of inter-ethnic conflict in Yakutsk, Balzer and Vinokurova (1996) detail several other smaller scale conflicts that took place in Yakutsk between the 1960s and the early 1990s to showcase the historic racially-charged landscape of Yakutsk. It is from this historical context this research unfolds.

1.2.5 Evenki and Eveny in Sakha Republic (Yakutia)

The Soviet Union radically modified the relationships Indigenous peoples had to each other, their traditions, and their ways of life, through state interventions. These interventions and adjustments made to Indigenous lives and relationships party explain why so many self-identified Indigenous peoples currently live in urban spaces, estimated to be nearly 45 per cent throughout Siberia and the Russian Far East (Balzer, 2016). Reindeer husbandry and land-based relationships were key economic and cultural practices for northern Indigenous peoples, along with hunting and fishing. Soviet government, however, saw Indigenous peoples and their nomadic traditions as 'backwards' and unsuited for developed society (Ventsel, 2005). If Indigenous peoples were to be thoroughly integrated into the Soviet project, much about Indigenous culture and life would need to be changed. To homogenize all citizens under a Soviet identity, land and women were identified as key subjects to be transformed by the masculinized state (Fondahl 1998; Rethmann 2001; Bloch 2004, 2005). Anthropologist Alexia Bloch expands on this fixation, explaining

> …ideals of the new Soviet woman were seen as critical in the socialization of children and the transformation of local communities, whereas the figure of woman as the bearer of tradition became suspect. Therefore, radically altering the gender

> roles of Indigenous Siberian women was tantamount to instilling socialist visions of modernity and transforming the 'backwardness' of herders' lives. (2005, p.543)

Sedentarization, collectivization, and residential schools were all strategies by which the Soviet state sought to disrupt and remake Indigenous women, their relationships to land, and their traditions.

Sedentarization resulted from the Soviet ideology demanding nomadic Indigenous social and economic practices be settled and assimilated into the nationally coordinated centralized economy. Government approaches and policies framed reindeer herders and interrelated communities practicing Indigenous economic traditions as uncontrollable and unproductive. Bloch (2000) notes that "forced sedentarization began in the 1930s when Soviet cadres fundamentally reorganized production among Indigenous Siberian groups by collectivizing subsistence practices." (p.45). Strategically established and governed villages facilitated and enforced transitions from nomadism to settlement. Newly formed villages received adverse reception and resistance; even community members unable to participate fully in nomadic lifestyles due to health or age refused to live in them, preferring to set up tents outside the villages (Fondahl, 1998).

The gendered arrangement of sedentarization and its contributions to Russian political conceptions of Indigenous 'traditionality' remain important to contextualize contemporary debates and ideas about the concept. As an overarching Soviet project, sedentarization sought to disrupt the continuity of Indigenous economies and kinship networks to propel Soviet plans for the social, cultural, and economic development of land (Slezkine, 1994). To accomplish this transformation, Indigenous women's roles and relationships in communities had to be fundamentally undermined to successfully splinter the integrity of Indigenous communities

and economic practices. Men actively engaged in reindeer husbandry or other nomadic economic practices, despite being uncontrollable and backwards to Soviet sensibilities, acceptably presented productivity, while women's engagement with different activities and responsibilities was disregarded. This required women to be settled and made productive in Soviet eyes to a greater degree than men. Thus, men's connections to what has been framed as 'traditional' practices and culture persisted, while womens connections to these practices experienced disruption. Geographer Gail Fondahl argues that "the gendered nature of sedentarization has been pinpointed as one of the key causes of the demise of reindeer husbandry" (1998, p.71). While reindeer husbandry has not completely disappeared from Indigenous social, cultural, or economic spheres, the transformation of these systems through sedentarization targeting Indigenous women had immense consequences. Craig Campbell, photographer and geographer, notes:

> …along with others labelled Tungus, the Evenkis are most well known for their nomadic mode of life and their spiritual culture: they are almost invariably represented as pastoral reindeer herders and shamans. While reindeer and shamans are key in the enduring symbolic worlds of Evenkis, in the twenty-first century many individuals have little regular or even direct experience with either. (2014, p. 17)

Subjugation and assimilation of northern Indigenous peoples into a productive and homogenized Soviet society targeted the foundational roles played by Indigenous women in expansive networks sustaining communities and ways of life. Manipulative policies contorting Indigenous relationships to each other, traditions, and land ensured profound and lasting consequences.

Residential schools (*internaty*) are another notable Soviet project that historically participated in the urbanization of Siberian Indigenous peoples by assimilating and settling

Indigenous children, families, and communities. The gendered dimensions of residential schools resemble those of sedentarization as Indigenous men and women had different experiences based on the gender ideologies and agendas of the state. This project again approached women as an important site of transformation by targeting children for education and integration into the Soviet national consciousness. Residential schools assimilated Indigenous children by requiring their attendance in state-controlled schools that would raise them, care for them, and educate them away from their nomadic parents and culture. In her book *Red Ties and Residential Schools* (2004), Alexia Bloch details the creation and expansion of the residential schools in Siberia during the Soviet period: "The schools originated as part of a system of fifteen so-called 'culture bases' *(kul'turnye bazy*) – outposts of the Soviet administration – established by the Committee of the North in what it called the 'darkest corners' of Siberia" (p.96). In addition to targeting family structures by removing children from their parents, residential schools permitted women to settle alongside their children rather than continue with their nomadic or land-based relationalities. By providing resources to support Indigenous women's transitions to sedentary lives alongside their children, the Soviet state found subversive strategies to absorb women into plans of national unity. Bloch (2004) explains how residential schools, promoted as state-sponsored child rearing and education, simultaneously addressed Indigenous women's 'liberation' and empowered them to participate in modernization. In both literature and personal conversations, Indigenous women remember these schools from complicated and divergent perspectives; despite insidious assimilatory tactics and policies woven into the education system, some Evenki women express longing for when resources were abundant, and embracing nationalism promised equality (Rethmann, 2001; Bloch, 2005).

Collectivization, a Soviet policy imposed on Indigenous agricultural economies and networks to subjugate them by the state, stands as a third major project informing the historical development of indigeneity in Russia and Sakha Republic (Yakutia). This policy designated reindeer husbandry as agricultural, and reindeer herds within Soviet boundaries thus became property of the state supervised by government appointed specialists (Bloch, 2000). This new status regulated how many reindeers a herder could have, with the goal of distributing wealth equally. Prior to this regulation, wealth would have been effectively distributed and shared through kinship networks and community governance structures. This change led to a dependence on the state for previously unnecessary supports and protections (Ventsel, 2005). Unfortunately, the state failed/refused to acknowledge the reciprocity and sustainability of these networks and relationships, deeming successful reindeer herders, fisherman, and hunters *kulaki,* or 'exploiters of the masses' (Slezkine, 1994; Fondahl, 1998). One of the main goals of the Soviet Union was to "conjure modernity as industrialization-cum-classlessness; the means was to exorcise backwardness through a total class war" (Slezkine, 1994, p.187). Measures taken to achieve 'equality' and fairness required the state to commit numerous injustices and violations of human rights (Rethmann, 2001). Bloch (2004) describes *kulak* reindeer herders as those

> …who either had hired labourers or who had more than the regionally proscribed number of privately held reindeer, 30 or so. From the 1930s to early 1950s, the term *kulak*, the Russian word for 'fist', came to be used as a catch-all label for anyone who was not abiding by local government efforts, in this case to collectivize herds and administer this area of central Siberia. (p.97)

Communism as an ideology declared a war on class, and villainized successful reindeer herders (as *kulaki*) to the point they experienced exile, had their possessions confiscated, and their families ostracized from Soviet society. Due to the political power and presence of those

labelled *kulaki* in northern native communities, Indigenous peoples were generally thought to be hostile to revolution and the progress associated with the principles of communism. This led to profound state-sponsored disruptions to Indigenous lifestyles, relationships, and economies with lasting impacts on contemporary Indigenous communities.

1.2.6 Sakha People in Sakha Republic (Yakutia)

The Sakha are the titular Indigenous people living in Sakha Republic (Yakutia), with a population of 466,492 throughout the Republic (Balzer, 2016). While most Sakha live in rural villages (284,834), a substantial urban Sakha population also exists (193,251). Sakha people are of Turkic origins and are estimated to have migrated from Central Asia in the 13th- 14th century, well before the arrival of the Russian Cossacks in the 17th century (Cruikshank & Argounova, 2000). Traditionally, they are cattle and horse breeders, and have adapted their pastoralist traditions to include reindeer in the subarctic environment of Yakutia. In a literature review on "Yakut ethnogenesis", Cruikshank and Argounova (2000) discuss the history of Sakha migration and adaptation to the region, with theories concluding:

> …Sakha ancestors probably separated from Steppe neighbors sometime during the early part of the millennium. Linguistic evidence indicates that as basic knowledge of agriculture and grains fell away in the subarctic, Sakha developed forms of pastoralism based on horse and cattle especially bred to thrive in more northerly climates. Archaeological evidence suggests that ancestors of the contemporary Yukaghir minority were the earliest inhabitants on the middle Lena, that Evenk people subsequently encroached on and displaced or assimilated them, and that both Yukaghir and Evenk were further displaced when Sakha first arrived in the Lena River valley more than 500 years ago." (p.101)

The long history of tensions between Indigenous nations (large and small-numbered) make tracing the origins of Sakha people important to considering the contemporary dynamics of inter-Indigenous relationships in Sakha Republic (Yakutia).

Sakha people experienced notable cultural repression from ethnic Russians during the Soviet Union era with the dominance of Russian as the hegemonic norm (Ferguson, 2015). Linguistic subjugation of non-Russian languages in the Soviet Union resulted in shaming and ostracism of indigenous language speakers by Russians, including Sakha speakers. In the later years of the Soviet Union, languages other than Russian in urban landscapes provoked antagonism and hostility (Ferguson & Sidorova, 2018). This was due to the national slogan, endorsed by both Lenin and Khrushchev, "Merging the nations", ultimately intended to Russify all non-Russian nationalities (Khazanov, 1995). This approach was inconsistently applied however, as Soviet leaders were apprehensive about resistance from non-Russian citizens, and, as Khazanov (1995) notes: "Instead, they set a more modest goal: acculturation and linguistic Russification of non-Russian nationalities in the USSR" (p.12). Because of Russian demographic dominance in Sakha Republic (Yakutia), and the monolingual culture of civic and federal communication, Sakha adopted attitudes of linguistic accommodation, privately speaking Sakha only in the absence of Russians. This accommodation resulted from "language ideologies coding Sakha as a backward, non-progressive, and ultimately rural language [sic] that also could potentially indicate disloyalty to the Communist cause and Soviet unification" (Ferguson & Sidorova, 2018, p.29). Older Sakha people in Yakutsk recount the shame they felt when caught speaking Sakha before the 1990s, and the appreciation they felt for the resurgence of cultural pride and language after the election of Nikolaev in 1991. However, larger national movements against policies and effects of Russification preceded the election of Nikolaev and alleviation of linguistic pressures from Russian society. In the mid 1980s, as the USSR was beginning to collapse, non-Russian nationalities including Estonians, Latvians, and Sakha started openly pushing back against policies of Russification effecting their

languages and cultures. Leading up to the collapse of the USSR, Sakha nationalism had already started to proliferate, manifesting in protests and conflicts in Yakutsk (Ventsel, 2018). The resurgence of Sakha language, culture, and ethnic pride was inevitable as Russians surrendered dominance over Sakha Republic (Yakutia). In the post-Soviet era, Sakha language was officialised alongside Russia with the establishment of Sakha Republic (Yakutia) in 1992, and the language has since experienced mass normalization and integration into the everyday lives of communities throughout the region (Ferguson, 2015).

1.2.7 Relationships between *KMNS* and Sakha in Sakha Republic (Yakutia)

Sakha are the most recent indigenous nation to arrive in Sakha Republic (Yakutia), having migrated between 600-800 years ago. Eveny and Evenki peoples also historically migrated to the republic, but have much longer established relations to the area and other Indigenous peoples than Sakha. However, the Soviet state viewed Sakha society as more advanced than those designated by the state as *KMNS* in terms of their evolutionary trajectory towards communist social and economic formations. This difference resulted in the Sakha nation becoming the titular people of the Republic and the fostering of different relationships with the Soviet state/Russian Federation than *KMNS*.

Relationships between Evenki and Eveny and Sakha peoples are dynamic; amongst the many characterizations of their relations is the phenomenon 'Yakutization'. While Sakha and *KMNS* communities both experienced Russification in the Soviet Union, additional pressures of 'Yakutization' historically and contemporarily shape their interactions (Balzer, 2016). 'Yakutization' generally references linguistic assimilation of *KMNS* through their Sakha relations, as far more *KMNS* speak Sakha than their native languages because of this trend.

Sidorova, Ferguson, & Vallikivi (2017) reiterate this point, explaining how during the Soviet era in Chersky (an eastern city in Sakha Republic (Yakutia)):

> Russian became the most important language of inter-ethnic communication, over the last 70 years there was also a period of significant 'yakutization'. The Sakha language spread through the boarding school system set up for children of reindeer herders and hunters. As a result, for most Yukagir, Chukchi and Eveny, the Sakha language became the main instructional language at school… (p. 138)

Following this, Balzer and Vinokurova (1996) clarify that "many Sakha insist as an article of faith that assimilation was consistently peaceful and voluntary, but few deny that the numbers and cultural strength of the aboriginal population (especially measured in terms of language survival) have been waning" (p. 111).

1.2.8. *KMNS* in Yakutsk/Indigenous Urbanization

Minimal English-language literature from Russia acknowledges or explores the lives of Evenki and Eveny people in urban spaces. However, a limited number of references discuss the presence of Indigenous Small Numbered Peoples in Russian cities, and a quick review of general literature available may be relevant to discussing the case of Yakutsk (Ventsel, 2018; Argounova-Low, 2007). Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, migration of Indigenous peoples, and particularly women, to urban landscapes has increased. This is for a few reasons, including climate change, economic struggles, and changing gender relations in rural areas and villages (Bloch, 2003; Vinokurova, 2017). Balzer (2016) connects the ongoing industrial development of resource-rich landscapes to Indigenous urbanization, writing:

> In the past decade, the pace of Northern land claims and grabs related to the energy and mining industries has accelerated, causing Indigenous peoples increased strife, including illegal expulsions from lands they have considered their use-right family and clan territories for centuries. This in turn has led to an unprecedented pace of indigenous urbanization in Siberia and the Far East, so that by some estimates as

> many as 45 per cent of self-identifying indigenous individuals are today urban" (p.10).

While not all Indigenous peoples leave their homelands and land-based ways of life because of illegal expulsion, these are important stories and experiences to consider as informing manifestations of urban indigeneity. None of the women who shared their stories for this research identified illegal expulsion or pressure from resource developments as reason for moving to Yakutsk, but these are realities that deserve recognition and further investigation.

Colonialism, displacement and urbanization are intimately interconnected for Indigenous peoples in the Russian Far East. As concentrated efforts to reduce indigenous claims to land and resources are underway, the political discourse reinforcing 'tradition' as definitive criterion for valid indigenous claims to land, community, and concurrent rights is a strategy to achieve this. On the restrictive nature of legal and political definitions of indigeneity in Russia, Balzer (2016) adds "newer legal definitions provide little room for self-identity, at a time when an influx of outsiders has already destabilized indigeneity" (p.12). A further discussion around the rhetoric reinforcing 'tradition' as a static and definitive criterion of indigeneity from an Indigenous feminist perspective follows in Chapter 2, emanating from the theoretical framework from which this project draws.

Often, internal migration of *KMNS* in Sakha Republic (Yakutia) to urban centers has been made possible by kinship networks and connections (Ventsel, 2005; Argounova-Low, 2007). In his book *Reindeer, Rodina, and Reciprocity: Kinship and Property Relations in a Siberian Village* (2005), Ventsel discusses the transformative potential of modern kinship networks, as they weave together traditional values and beliefs in new geographically disparate relationships. In the Soviet Union, kinship networks constantly evolved to address challenges

stemming from the imposition and enforcement of sedentarization and collectivization. As an important traditional relational practice, kinships weathered the adversities to become an integral survival strategy. In the 1950s, the out-migration of Indigenous peoples from villages to the city of Yakutsk to pursue work and educational opportunities "enlarged the 'geography of kinship', [and] also linked through intermarriage new people and their kin with families in the Anabarskii district"[5] (Ventsel, 2005, p.154). This expansion continues today, and, as will be demonstrated throughout this thesis, represents the how static notions of traditional Indigenous relationships and economies held by the Russian state fail to accurately represent the realities and futures of Evenki and Eveny peoples.

Ethnic Russian and other settler nations have internalized state representations and stereotypes about northern Indigenous peoples as backwards, uncivilized, and incompatible with urban lives. This has fostered negative attitudes among urban residents towards *KMNS* in Yakutsk, treating them as though they do not belong nor should they try to belong in the city due to their 'lack of culture'. Argounova-Low (2007) describes the ethnic divide in Yakutsk between those who 'belong' as being 'cultured' (Russian and Sakha), and those who 'do not belong' (*KMNS*) as 'uncultured'. While rural Sakha and *KMNS* alike arriving to Yakutsk navigate negative stereotypes and characteristics, connections between urban and rural kin remain deeply entrenched and elicit compassion even from kin deeply prejudiced. Argounova-Low describes the obligations felt by urban Sakha to assist young relatives from villages when they first arrive to Yakutsk, even when it is "burdensome and tiring" (2007, p.54). Differing tolerance and attendance to kinship responsibilities and obligations between Indigenous

[5] The Anabarskii district is one of thirty four administrative districts of the Sakha Republic (Yakutia), located in the furthest northwestern part of the republic.

peoples is further explored in the fourth chapter as it relates to self-determination and agency of evolving kinship networks. Acknowledging the diversity of Indigenous peoples, small or large-numbered, and their differing engagements with relational responsibilities is fundamental to understanding the dynamic interactions and relations developed in Sakha Republic (Yakutia) amongst the many indigenous community members.

1.3 Positionality/Accountability as a Foreign Researcher

My research, guided by an anti-colonial, feminist, Indigenous perspective, draws inspiration from my deep roots navigating and creating a sense of place for myself in the liminal spaces connecting Indigenous communities throughout what is currently known as British Columbia. I have moved between unceded Wet'suwet'en and Lheidli T'enneh First Nation territories in northern BC, Songhees, Esquimalt and WSANEC territories on Vancouver Island, and unceded xʷməθkwəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxw 7mesh (Squamish), and Səl̓ lwətaʔ/Selilwitulh (Tsleil-Waututh) territories on which Vancouver has been built for much of my adult life. Personal experiences respectfully and intentionally creating place and relational responsibilities as a Cree-Metis woman visiting other Indigenous territories is a constant and humbling practice that I have woven into my academic and intellectual endeavours. The stories that my family, my ancestors, and I carry of creating a sense of belonging in the liminality between urban and rural landscapes constantly inspire my research, and enriches the relationships, ideas, and opportunities integral to my academic and personal journey.

The many responsibilities that formed the foundation of this work, and the new ones that have developed over its course are vast. Primarily, I am accountable to the ancestral

relations that go unseen but are ever-present in my life. My ancestral accountabilities are deeply personal, and rarely do I share the extent to which they guide my day-to-day relationships and ideas, but much of my academic and political strength and motivation is drawn from them.

I also acknowledge my responsibilities to walk in good ways with integrity and intention on territories of those I visit – growing up on unceded Wet'suwet'en territories in Northern BC as a Metis/Cree woman helped me develop this mindfulness and carry it forward in my research endeavours. Living on the traditional territories of Indigenous peoples with whom I had not established relations before my arrival necessitated a constant navigation of this awareness. Over the course of the four months I spent in Yakutsk I was able to begin cultivating similarly receptive and mindful relationships with the city, peoples, and cultures of Sakha Republic (Yakutia), which I honour as I write this thesis from unceded Lheidli T'enneh First Nation territories.

1.4 Overview of Themes and Structure

This thesis contributes to an ongoing development of global narratives about vibrant, resilient, and innovative urban indigeneity. My perspective weaves together and analyzes stories from Evenki and Eveny women in the city of Yakutsk by framing the challenges they navigate as in dialogue with the robust imaginations and communities budding and flourishing. The robust relationships and ambitions of Indigenous women described challenges colonial presentations of urban Indigenous people as isolated, inauthentic, and deteriorating. I assert that urban indigeneity is Indigenous self-determination mobilized to redefine Indigenous community formations, relationships, and cultural practices to meet contemporary and diverse community needs. As Indigenous communities in cities expand and evolve, so too do rights to

self-governance and sovereign interactions based on intersecting traditional and contemporary perspectives and responsibilities informed by urban dynamics demand celebration. This introductory chapter reviews the historical context for indigeneity in Russia unfolding in rural and nomadic spatialities, and the general lack of consideration previously afforded to Indigenous women.

Chapter 2 reviews the theoretical frameworks informing my approach to the research questions, as well as the methodologies and methods employed to build relationships and witness stories from Evenki and Eveny women in Yakutsk. I make connections between a critical Indigenous feminist engagement with stories to a global relationship building and accountability process among Indigenous women. By critically engaging 'tradition', I explicitly challenge colonial definitions and interactions between *KMNS* women and communities and the Russian state. Chapter 2 also reflects on how interview questions guiding this work, the storytelling process, and ideas coming from an Indigenous perspective located in Western discourse continuously evolved over four months of fieldwork to reflect the integrity of realities illuminated by stories.

Chapter 3 explores inter-indigenous colonialism and assimilation as it unfolds in the Yakutsk. Multifaceted tensions and dynamics are revealed to be part of 'Yakutization', which, for the purposes of this thesis, refers to Sakha pressures on Indigenous peoples to assimilate into Sakha social, political, and cultural arrangements when they arrive to the city. 'Yakutization' was a central theme present throughout a majority of stories witnessed, and is an important aspect of urban indigeneity in Yakutsk to keep in mind. I analyse this phenomenon specifically in the context of pressures experienced by young Indigenous women when they arrive in Yakutsk to pursue education. This phenomenon had a distinct impact on

young women's senses of community belonging and personal identity as they adapted to Indigenous life in an urban space. This chapter considers the range of inter-indigenous tensions entangled in 'Yakutization', including impacts on language, personal identity, and cultural expressions.

Considering the challenges introduced in the previous chapter, Chapter 4 celebrates Indigenous self-determination and how urban indigeneity restructures the relations present in self-determining communities. A brief overview of how kinship networks connect Evenki and Eveny people and communities is included, leading to an analysis of how inclusive kinships cultivated by urban Eveny and Evenki women support young Indigenous women arriving to Yakutsk, while simultaneously disrupting processes of Yakutization. It then describes how these traditional relationships have been energized in contemporary situations by intertwining innovative and creative community formations into these relations, using the example of urban Indigenous dance ensembles.

Chapter 5 summarizes the key themes of this project and offers ideas (from an Indigenous perspective rooted in Western experiences) on how urban Indigenous women in Yakutsk might consolidate the many strategies being drawn on to increase accessibility and awareness of resources. I conclude by reflecting on how the length of time spent living and working in Yakutsk enriched this thesis by incorporating numerous perspectives, observations, and relationships into its narrative.

The overarching narrative of this thesis acknowledges the challenges facing urban Indigenous communities and individuals in Yakutsk while emphasizing the resilience and innovation they exemplify. Challenging 'trauma narratives' so frequently associated with

urban Indigenous peoples in major cities that focus on negativity, isolation, loss, and poverty remains critical for re-storying urban indigeneity. Framing lives of urban Indigenous women in the Russian Far East in the confident and ambitious styles they describe themselves and their lives without undermining their strength to overcome obstacles defines the key goals of this project.

1.5 Defining "Women": A Note on Gender

As this thesis draws on an anti-colonial critical Indigenous feminist perspective, intentionally acknowledging the expansive manifestations of womanhood is necessary to proceed. Discourses considering gendered norms, experiences, and histories engaged by Indigenous and non-Indigenous academics in Russia emanates from the firmly established and rigorously reinforced gender binary that privileges patriarchal heteronormativity. Social and cultural structures policing gender performed within the binary of 'men' and 'women' have been historically produced, reproduced, and modernly reinforced within Sakha Republic (Yakutia) based on ideas of 'civilizing' the region. Only very recently have researchers taken up questions about rigid hegemonic masculinity in the region (Ventsel, 2018). There are currently no English-language writings about Evenki or Eveny women in Sakha Republic (Yakutia) that indicate any challenges to heteronormative colonial gender norms or roles. Based on both available literature as well as my observations throughout this project, those who identify as women in in Sakha Republic (Yakutia), in both Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities, appear to uphold and observe these structures.

Working on this project as a Cree-Metis woman with roots in academic and non-academic communities that advocate for, celebrate, and include gender expressions that disrupt

and challenge settler colonial norms and structures was therefore difficult. However, it was important for me as a foreign researcher to remain mindful of the consequences and risks elicited by overt challenges to established Russian structures that reinforce gender and sexuality experienced by Russian citizens. During conversations and stories, I was presented with a relatively homogenized understanding of what womanhood looked like and how it was defined; however, I do not believe that these ideas represent a static nor all-encompassing representation of women, or gender, for Evenki or Eveny culture. I am conscious of the many historical and contemporary political pressures and fears that have been instilled in the Russian body politic naturalizing gender and sexuality binaries. Evenki and Eveny women in Sakha Republic (Yakutia) may not have opportunities to exhibit or reveal expansive embodiments of their gender(s), for fear of persecution for defying the rigid gender binary so firmly upheld by Russian society, government, and law enforcement agencies. For these reasons, my research does not include or speak to experiences of non-binary community members. Rather, this thesis mirrors the language used in Russian political, legal, and social discourse, drawing on terminology and ideas that do not directly challenge nor disrupt the boundaries the women I spent time with in Yakutsk continue to observe and navigate. While I enthusiastically celebrate and engage gender identities and expressions that undermine and destabilize the settler colonial gender binary and heteronormative agendas, this research accepts and honours cross-cultural differences in what can and cannot be expressed as womanhood due to potential risks and consequences from the Russian state.

Chapter 2: Theory, Methodologies, and Methods

Framing this work as ceremony is crucial for grounding the development, emergence, and results of this research in my positionality, my relations, and my hopes as an Indigenous woman working within and alongside Indigenous communities. Shawn Wilson's book *Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods* (2008) offers nuanced insights for developing this project with the intention of international indigenous relationality and community building. Wilson writes:

> …for Indigenous people research is ceremony. In our cultures, an integral part of any ceremony is setting the stage properly. When the ceremonies take place, everyone who is participating needs to be ready to step beyond the everyday and to accept a raised state of consciousness. (2008, p.69)

Setting the stage involves detailing the theories, methodologies, and methods that inspire the approaches and ideas of this research. The relational integrity woven throughout these elements serves as a constant reminder of the overarchingly ceremonial nature of my research.

2.1 Theory

This section addresses the theoretical framework providing the culturally-specific positioning of this project and how I approach key concepts, findings, and relationships throughout. I draw strength from critical Indigenous feminist theory to challenge the institutionalized colonial inclinations of geography and political science as academic disciplines. Witnessing and honouring urban Indigenous women's stories from Yakutsk, Sakha Republic (Yakutia) requires constant flexibility and reflectivity, necessitating collaboration with theory that celebrates dynamism. Indigenous feminism, in critical conversation with feminist and political geography, establishes a strong foundation for this project as it meaningfully engages with the dynamic nature of Indigenous women, their

spatialities, and their stories. It further provides a useful intersection from which to be mindful of my own social and cultural location as an Indigenous woman conducting research alongside Indigenous communities and individuals with whom I am unfamiliar.

2.1.1 Indigenous Feminism and Geography

As an ideological starting point, feminism establishes an explicitly gendered approach to understanding space, place, and situated knowledges, as "feminism is foundationally about the importance of considering women's experiences, especially through social and cultural practices" (Green, 2017, p.15). However, 'whitestream' feminism fails to meaningfully consider the experiences of non-white women and their political, cultural, and systemic struggles, instead actively perpetuating structures of colonization (Grande, 2003). Therefore, rather than working with 'whitestream' feminist theory that does not foundationally acknowledge colonialism, indigeneity, or relational responsibilities, this project works within the theoretical landscapes of Indigenous feminism. These landscapes celebrate the multiplicities of Indigenous feminisms, rather than imagining a single definition of Indigenous feminism (Goeman & Denetdale, 2009). As (critical) Indigenous feminists Mishauana Goeman & Jennifer Denetdale (2009) argue, "our dreams and goals overlap; we desire to open up spaces where generations of colonialism have silenced Native peoples…about the intersections of power and dominations that have shaped Native nations and gender relations" (p.10). Foregrounding theory privileging the vast intellectual traditions of Indigenous women's storytelling unsettles settler feminist geographic theories that actively obscures Indigenous women's spatial and relational knowledge of place. deLeeuw & Hunt (2018) articulate the potential of this approach as it challenges, disrupts, and unsettles normative disciplinary areas

of study by decentering "colonial frames of knowledge…to make Indigenous peoples lived realities more visible on their own terms as an expression of self-determination" (p.9).

Indigenous feminism roots itself at intersections of Indigenous worldviews, values, and theories that center women as an intervention into white feminism's erasures of indigeneity and ongoing structures of violent heteropatriarchal colonialism (Rowe & Tuck, 2017). English, Ktunaxa, and Cree-Scottish Metis scholar Joyce Green describes Indigenous feminism as drawing "on core elements of Indigenous cultures – in particular, the nearly universal connection to land, to territory, through relationships framed as sacred responsibility…predicated on reciprocity…and definitive of culture and identity" (2017, p.4). Hawaiian scholar Lisa Kahaleole Hall further describes it as a framework that "…grapples with the ways patriarchal colonialism has been internalized within indigenous communities, as well as analyzing the sexual and gendered nature of the process of colonization" (2009, p.16). Taking care to identify and challenge gendered relations structured by colonialism and a Soviet legacy in Russia positions this investigation within an Indigenous feminist framework.

Indigenous feminism offers a useful and expansive theoretical framework to carry out an interdisciplinary project honouring Indigenous women's experiences and stories in the city of Yakutsk. This framework mobilizes critical attendance to issues of violence, gender, and race in academic studies that may otherwise deem such analyses irrelevant. Indigenous feminism has previously been framed as inconsistent with 'broader' Indigenous political movements – it highlights the multifaceted relations Indigenous women have with heteropatriarchal and colonial oppression, without restricting these tensions to colonial actors (Starblanket, 2017). The challenges this study poses to features of indigeneity, governance,

and rights movements that are often taken for granted or perceived as static makes this an appropriate framework to integrate.

Geography as a colonial project has had complex relations with Indigenous lands, stories, and understandings of space since its earliest colonial deployments, with contemporary entanglements of geography with Indigenous peoples and colonialism perpetuating these strained relations. Australian geographer Penelope Edmonds identifies the limitations of traditional approaches taken by geographers to the effects of colonialism on cities (2010). Edmonds writes about the functionalistic focus on circulating goods and products leading to the omittance of "…the important human and cultural aspects of empire's urbanizing landscapes: the displacements and transformations of peoples and ideas" (p.50). Kwaguilth (Kwakwaka'wakw) geographer Sarah Hunt further illuminates the responsibilities of geography as a discipline to evolve, arguing –

> Geographers must begin grappling with the unsettling nature of engaging Indigenous knowledge in processes that are rarely clear, neat, linear or straight-forward, but are instead productively confusing. This might entail embracing the shifting relationality, complexity, and circularity of Indigenous knowledge as productive and necessary. The situated-ness and place-specific nature of Indigenous knowledge calls for the validation of new kinds of theorizing and new epistemologies that can account for situated, relational Indigenous knowledge and yet remain engaged with broader theoretical debates within geography. (2014, p.31)

To better understand the transitions, governance, and connections of Indigenous peoples living in cities, as well as gender dynamics that differentiate these crucial experiences, Indigenous feminist geography has been a useful theoretical framework on which to build this project because of the culturally specific values it offers to explore the city of Yakutsk. In a conversation about the presence of Indigenous women in Canadian cities, geographer Evelyn Peters argued that "feminist historical geographers…challenged the discipline by asserting that

women created new kinds of spaces and had markedly different experiences of emplacement and power than those represented in traditional male-centered urban models" (2010, p.55). These challenges and ideas about the evolution of geography as a discipline to better illuminate and celebrate gendered experiences of place and power makes an Indigenous feminist geographical perspective such an important foundation for this project to blossom from.

Mushkegowuk (Swampy Cree) geographer Michelle Daigle elaborates on the responsibilities of geographers to engage in decolonial praxis, writing:

> [A] decolonial praxis urges geographers to think of how their work and everyday practices – scholarly and otherwise – actively dismantle colonial structures and relations of power, while building renewed ones that are accountable to the Indigenous political and legal authorities of the lands that many geographers occupy. (Naylor et al., 2018, p.201)

Developing international relationships and responsibilities necessitates this type of praxis by critically using feminist and political geographies as an Indigenous woman to engage in interdisciplinary research with Indigenous communities. Obligations to carefully consider if and how this work challenges colonial structures and power imbalances navigated by *KMNS* women in Yakutsk honours responsibilities inherent to bearing witness to Indigenous women's stories.

2.1.2 Feminist Geography

Feminist geography has been around since the late 1970s/early 1980s, but its entrenchment in 'whitestream' feminism obstructs its considerations of colonialism, indigenous knowledges, or the multiplicities of identities that impact and are impacted by spatialities. Feminist geography aims to identify and challenge the oppression of women generally and geographically, by showing that "physical and social spaces and places have

been socially constructed to reflect and reinforce unequal gendered social relations" (Dias & Blecha, 2007). Valentine (2007) challenged feminist geographers to rethink how they engage with "questions of structural inequalities and power…" as "attention to lived experience, through rigorous empirical work, offers an important tool for feminist geography to understand the intimate connections between the production of space and the systemic production of power" (p.19). While this challenge emerged over ten years ago, tensions persist within scholarly communities as to the meaningfulness of contributions made to intersectional, indigenous feminist geographical theory. Increased attention to lived experiences and their intersectional nature by feminist geographers over the past decade has enriched the discipline, demonstrating the explicit and nuanced entanglements that identities of multiplicity have with space, place, and territoriality (Butcher & Maclean, 2018; Maclean, 2018).

Feminist Geography in Conversation with Political Geography

As geographer Jennifer Hyndman argues, "[f]eminist geography is already inherently political in that it advocates change where social, economic, or political relations, including those of gender, are inequitable, violent, or exploitative" (2004, p.308). Ongoing development of dialogues between feminist and political geographies have offered insights into how feminist geography, and (critical) feminist geopolitics can benefit from reconfiguring approaches to examinations of varying scales of power dynamics (Hyndman, 2004; Carte & Torres, 2014). Similarly, critiques from decolonial political theorists about the perpetuation of asymmetrical knowledge production in political and feminist geography illuminates the benefits of acknowledging 'the colonial difference'. Geographer Lindsay Naylor defines the colonial difference as "the site of othering whereby systems of knowledge are hierarchized…To think from the colonial difference then is to not only acknowledge centuries of imperialism and

contemporary 'othering', but also to recognize and speak from the underside" (Naylor et al., 2018. p.199). She goes on to say "[t]hinking from the colonial difference does not negate western ways of knowing, or specify thinking from a "fixed geopolitical place", but is instead a rethinking of space and time that is multiple and varied" (ibid, p.200). These interventions are crucial for feminist and political geographical engagement with indigenous stories, responsibilities, and relationships as they demand decolonial praxis.

2.1.3 Critical Engagement with "Traditionality"

Indigenous feminist theories concern themselves with confronting unbalanced power dynamics forcing Indigenous women, Two-Spirit people and other gender diverse relations to navigate ongoing violences to our relations, bodies, and lands. Decolonial praxis for Indigenous feminists thus necessitates participating in critical articulation of the power-laden discourse of 'tradition', and challenging "the authority to determine what tradition is authentic, how it is to be practiced, and what the penalties are for breaching it" (Green, 2017, p.13). Cree/Saulteaux scholar Gina Starblanket notes the valuable lens Indigenous feminism offers for deconstructing this discourse: "Specifically, it can help illuminate the ways that gendered notions of cultural authenticity and tradition can function as a containment strategy to insulate existing power relations from critique…Indigenous feminism takes the diversity of Indigenous peoples' lives and experiences seriously and sees them all as politically significant" (2017, p.38). Indigenous traditions and traditionality differs vastly within and between families, communities, and territories, based on shifting power dynamics, identities, and relationships. Furthermore, these elements are not impervious to global forces such as globalization, capitalism, patriarchy, and urbanization. Presenting them as static and impenetrable is a

strategic tactic with a gendered motive to perpetuate colonial and male hegemony over cultures, communities, and societies.

Critical engagements with the power held by "traditionality" as synonymous with non-urban spaces in legal and political discourse on Indigenous people in the Russian state must be undertaken to understand the cultural and political pressures that urban Indigenous communities and peoples are subjected to. The manipulation by Russian laws and political discourse of Indigenous mobility to diminish and deny indigeneity echoes Anishinaabe legal scholar John Borrows assertion that "[w]hen it comes to issues of mobility, the law is interpreted flexibly to accomplish results that are the most detrimental to Indigenous interests" (p.409, 2009). Centering the voices of urban Indigenous women in Yakutsk unsettles binaries established between urban and rural, traditional and non-traditional, authentic and inauthentic Indigenous experiences as an Indigenous approach to geography by articulating:

> …culturally specific place-based practices and philosophies on their own terms, pushing beyond the limitations of colonial frames in which an equation of "indigenous" with "nature" has been a mechanism of discounting Indigenous peoples as modern political subjects" (deLeeuw & Hunt, 2018, p.9).

Naming settler politicizations of tradition as non-benevolent and non-altruistic conceptualizations of identity opens spaces for dialogues to take place around traditions that nourish, empower, and invigorate Indigenous peoples as opposed to notions of traditionality that belong to discourse concerned with power, gender violence, and state manipulation.

Anthropologist Craig Campbell's moves this dialogue forward in his discussion of Evenki traditions of mobility exemplified in "system of paths" (2003). Campbell borrows this term from the early psychological analysis of Tungus by Sergei Mikhailovich Shirokogoroff (1935), expanding on Shirokogoroff's assertion of the cultural and technical achievements

these systems represent. Campbell analyzes the intersections of Evenki mobility with issues of community, history, and identity, while simultaneously explicitly asserting: "my argument is meant to ensure that the system of paths resists being de-historicized and typified as a complex of unchanging cultural practices over time that are neither immutable nor rigid" (2003, p.100). He recognizes the dangers of confining cultural practices and knowledge to historical realms and, throughout his discussion of the impacts of globalization on Evenki intellectual traditions and practices on mobility, acknowledges their shifting and adaptive nature. This critical scholarly engagement with the empowering fluidity of Indigenous traditions and traditionality coupled with intentional recognition of implicated discursive power dynamics around traditions persistence offers an example of insightful multifaceted analysis of concepts without allowing them to perpetrate colonial harms on Indigenous subjects of inquiry. As Hawaaian feminist Lisa Kahaleole Hall (2009) reminds us, "Reconstructing tradition and memory is a vital element of indigenous survival, [but] there is nothing simple or one-dimensional about the process of reconstruction" (p.31).

Discussions critical of static and 'authentic' traditionality challenge the concept and its history as a defining characteristic of indigeneity deemed recognizable by settler colonial states. By allowing subjective perceptions of traditionalism to determine whose identity is recognized, tradition has been a source of conflict and lateral violence in Indigenous communities (Denetdale, 2009). Furthermore, it has normalized settler colonial states reinforcement of policies that perpetuate rigid discourses demanding adherence to static and homogenized embodiments of traditional indigeneity. In *When Did Indians Become Straight?* Rifkin (2011) demystifies traditionality, pointing out its strategic perpetuation by settler colonialism to establish false dichotomies between people, beliefs, and responsibilities that are

or are not 'authentic'. He poignantly asks "what constitutes tradition? Who decides, and under what circumstances are such determinations made? Or, put another way, can the effort to locate tradition be distinguished entirely from the process of imperial interpellation?" (p.21). These questions are critical to creating space for Indigenous communities to exist beyond an antiquated standard frozen in time, removed from landscapes defined by realities of globalization, capitalism, and urbanization.

"Tradition" in Russia: A Repressive Concept

In the Russian Federation, Indigenous maintenance of traditions is central to legal and political recognition of who is entitled to rights, protections, and recognition by the state. In the late 1980s as the Soviet Union began to destabilize, federal policies such as *glasnost'* allowed for a frank review of the situations facing Indigenous peoples in the Russian North. Widespread consensus on the appalling realities and struggles facing these communities spurred Indigenous leaders, advocates, and concerned non-Indigenous citizens to search for strategies to address the disparities between the wellbeing of Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. A lack of rights to land to continue and preserve 'traditional' activities and culture emerged as a focal explanation for the state of affairs, resulting in spokespersons for numerous Indigenous peoples stressing the need for secure land bases to be allocated to maintain traditional practices (Fondahl, Lazebnik, & Poelzer, 2000). This emphasis on traditionality internalized by governments and advocates left a resounding legacy for criterion defining indigeneity in Russian.

In the Russian Constitution (1993), as well as the three key federal laws passed specifically on Indigenous peoples in 1999[6], 2000[7], and 2001[8], traditionality is positioned as a neccesary characteristic of peoples and activities (Zadorin et al, 2017). Russian law defines small-numbered Indigenous peoples as: "Peoples living in the territories *traditionally* inhabited by their ancestors, retaining *traditional* ways of life, occupations, and trades, numbering fewer than fifty-thousand individuals in the Russian Federation, and maintaining their own independent ethnic communities." (emphasis added, Russian Federation Federal Law No.82, 30 April 1999) For *KMNS* to receive state protections, recognition of indigeneity, and concomitant rights, they must live fit into these narrow and politically-charged characteristics. Adherence to lifestyles, practices, and spatialities deemed 'traditional' by the Russian state affords rights, protections, and privileges to those approved for *KMNS* status. These include "exemption from land tax if they are engaged in 'traditional economic activities in places of residence and economic activities of the small-numbered minorities'" (Donahoe et al., 2008), the option to establish kin-based communities (*obshchiny),* exemption from income tax, prioritized natural resource use, compensation from impacts of resource extraction, early retirement benefits, and exemption from mandatory military service.

While there are benefits to performing and embodying state-sanctioned expectations of indigeneity, the focus on tradition in Russian political landscapes functions as a "strategy of control, management, and administration" (Donahoe et al., 2008, p.1000). It is the condition of 'traditionality' demanded by the Russian state from Indigenous communities to qualify for

[6] Russian Federation Federal Law No.82 *On The Guarantees Of The Rights Of The Indigenous Small-Numbered Peoples Of The Russian Federation* 30 April 1999
[7] Russian Federation Federal Law No.104 *On General Principles Of Organization The Indigenous Small-Numbered Peoples' Communities Of The North, Siberia and Far East Of The Russian Federation* 20 July 2000
[8] Russian Federation Federal Law No.49 *On Territories Of Traditional Land Use Of The Indigenous Small-Numbered Peoples Of The North, Siberia And The Far East Of The Russian Federation* 7 May 2001

these important benefits that is problematic. Anthropologist Marjorie M. Balzer (2016) argues that the qualifier of tradition was intended to reduce the number of Indigenous people able to claim recognition and associated protections or benefits:

> In Russia's parliament (*duma*), efforts have been underway since the early 2000s to revise laws that govern indigenous peoples, to make the definitions as narrow as possible so that *lgoty*, legal dispensations, apply to as few as possible in Native access to hunting, fishing, forests, and land. This especially restricts those who have moved to towns and cities of their regions, and who may want to return periodically to their families in their shrinking homelands. It limits options, literally and psychologically, for returning to indigenous peoples' territories, and becomes an assurance that there will be as few competitors as possible for post-Soviet land ownership claims. (p.11)

This strategic manipulation of Indigenous cultures, beliefs, and realities by the Russian state must be recognized and resisted, as demands for homogenized and static embodiments of indigeneity is creating new and challenging landscapes for Indigenous women to navigate.

In his exploration of the applicability of the term 'genocide' to describe global Indigenous experiences of colonization, Patrick Wolfe (2006) describes 'repressive authenticity' as a tactic deployed by states to sustain and reinforce settler colonial projects of assimilation and elimination. Wolfe defines repressive authenticity as "a feature of settler-colonial discourse in many countries…not genocidal in itself, though it eliminates large numbers of empirical natives from official reckonings" (2006, p.402). Tim Rowse (2014) further explores repressive authenticity as it relates to Indigenous peoples in Australia, writing

> In performing repressive authenticity, the settler society recognizes Indigenous peoples as bearers of pre-contact culture that remain always different from the culture of the settler society. Benefits – both material and symbolic – may accrue to the Indigenous people who claim such recognition, but to gain these benefits Indigenous Australians have to perform according to certain settler colonial notions of their authenticity as Indigenous peoples. (p.299)

Applied to a Russian context, repressive authenticity illuminates recognition as contingent on expressions of indigeneity that adhere to strategic state interpellations of identity, culture, and realities. Assessing the criterion for recognition of *KMNS* status in Russia indicates the direct conflict these characteristics have with the pace and ferocity of industrial resource development across Indigenous territories in Sakha Republic (Yakutia), militarization of the Arctic, climate change, and an explicit history of Indigenous women's removal from traditional activities. Performing repressive authenticity reduces Indigenous communities in Sakha Republic (Yakutia) to narrow state-approved manifestations of indigeneity. Expressions of indigeneity associated with "tradition" spatialities, practices, and community are simultaneously enshrined in policy and targeted for disappearance because of their incompatibility with contemporary power dynamics of global forces of neoliberal capitalism and a rapidly shifting climate. While Indigenous peoples are resilient and will persist, the strategic logic to the definitive presence of "tradition" as it currently operates to define *KMNS* is an insidious state tactic of assimilation.

Boundaries around recognizable Evenki and Eveny identities are discriminatory, as spatial impacts of globalization, climate change, capitalism, colonialism, and urbanization rapidly shift the landscapes in which they were established. While Russian laws and the promised protections from resource extraction and development restrict opportunities for Indigenous self-determination, they do not make it impossible. Regardless of state recognition and qualification for benefits, *KMNS* are confident in their indigeneity in its many contemporary, customary, and liminal expressions. Balzer (2016) writes:

> …many indigenous people practice more than a stereotyped "traditional way of life," and some are involved in trading, mining, energy industry and other activities that require continual contact and travel across traditional villages and camps and urban centers. Like many others across the North, they may operate at various levels of a globalizing economy and still consider themselves Native. (p. 11)

Even in the bureaucratically-dependent and oppressive political landscape of Russia, Indigenous self-determination is persistent and resilient. For this reason, paying attention to the cultivations of urban *KMNS* communities from the perspective of women can offer insight into how urban Indigenous self-determination is being engaged in. Urban indigenous communities and stories, while generally ignored by the state, are transforming local, national, and global understandings of the innovative adaptability of indigeneity and traditions to all landscapes.

2.2 Methodologies

This research intertwines my personal and political passions and responsibilities, woven inextricably with my cultural and academic priorities as a young Cree-Metis woman. Thus, storytelling and witnessing methodologies are reflective of the active and multifaceted relationships roles developed in this undertaking. Explaining the values integral to an Indigenous research paradigm, Shawn Wilson (2008) writes: "…an Indigenous methodology must be a process that adheres to relational accountability. Respect, reciprocity, and responsibility are key features of any healthy relationship and must be included in an Indigenous methodology" (p.77). Relational accountability is a key piece of the Indigenous research paradigm articulated by Wilson (2008) that I draw on throughout this research process. The interactions between ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology constitute an Indigenous research paradigm (Wilson, 2008). These interactions are relational, and demand accountability to their responsibilities, which storytelling and witnessing methodologies are attentive to. I also want to acknowledge that I rely heavily on inter-national Indigenous intellectual traditions and theory, as I do not have a firm grounding in my own nations' intellectual or theoretical traditions. For the purposes of this project, the relations

between what has been written by inter-national Indigenous scholars and writers establishes a grounded rationale for engaging these Indigenous methodologies.

2.2.1 Storytelling

Storytelling methodologies are an important Indigenous academic project, mixing established academic methodological approaches with Indigenous cultural practices and intellectual traditions (Smith, 2012, p.144). Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith discusses the value of storytelling to research interested in decolonizing institutions that uphold settler colonialism to make space for Indigenous peoples and our knowledges:

> Storytelling, oral histories, the perspectives of elders and of women have become an integral part of all indigenous research. Each individual story is powerful. But the point about the stories is not that they simply tell a story, or tell a story simply. These new stories contribute to a collective story in which every indigenous person has a place. (2012, p. 145)

Indigenous storytelling is a multifaceted methodology, existing at the intersection of multiple relationships and responsibilities. Tanana Athabascan scholar Dian Million makes an important contribution to the expansion of Indigenous methodological approaches that celebrate stories from Indigenous women with felt theory. Million (2009) notes the impacts of vulnerabilities, experiences, and feelings about violence and abuse expressed by Indigenous women in Canada in the late 20th century on scholarship previously dominated by white male perspectives. Felt knowledge from Lee Maracle (1975, 1990), Maria Campbell (1973), and others brought previously suppressed narratives into academic and public discourses, challenging the segregation of Indigenous women's stories into 'feminine' experiences rather than as valuable knowledge. Million articulates the intellectual traditions of women's feelings as culturally mediated theory, demanding space for these knowledges to be taken seriously as they represent "important projections of what is happening in our lives" (2009, p.61).

Sto:lo scholar Jo-Ann Archibald engages with different Indigenous contributions to the expansion of storytelling as an academic project in her book *Indigenous Storywork: Educating the Heart, Mind, Body, and Spirit* (2008). She notes the roles that stories take on as teachers in different cultural contexts, and the inherent social and cultural responsibilities of those listening to them. Archibald's work emphasizes the attentiveness, reverence, and reciprocity required by story-based methodologies, and the important process of creating "an opportunity to activate the story's life force" (2008, p.148). Thinking about stories as living forces, carrying deeply personal and theoretical knowledge and power, has been central to my engagement with storytelling methodology.

The use of stories and storytelling methods allows my cultural perspective and relationship to research as an Indigenous woman to be integrated throughout this project and the relationships it is built around. Using storytelling to engage in geographic research is part of a decolonial praxis, as argued by Sarah Hunt. She writes:

> Looking to Indigenous epistemologies for ways to get beyond the ontological limits of what is legible as western scholarship, a number of Indigenous scholars have pointed to stories, art, and metaphor as important transmitters of Indigenous knowledge. Stories and storytelling are widely acknowledged as culturally nuanced ways of knowing, produced within networks of relational meaning making. (Hunt, 2013, p.27)

Hunt elaborates further on the radical interference of Indigenous storytelling on established understandings of geography from a Western perspective –

> Making ontological shifts in the types of geographic knowledge that is legible within the discipline requires destabilizing how we come to know indigeneity and what representational strategies are used in engaging with Indigenous ontologies, as differentiated from Western ontologies of indigeneity. (Hunt, 2013, p.28)

As a foundational methodology to this project, storytelling and its concern with the urban geography of Yakutsk ultimately seeks to destabilize the way that indigeneity is known and controlled in Russia.

2.2.2. Witnessing

I am grateful for Sarah Hunt's conceptualization and articulation of witnessing as Indigenous methodology, and for the depth its interactive dialogue with storytelling adds. Hunt describes the role of a witness in the context of a potlach:

> Sitting in the smoke-saturated bighouse, hearing the songs being sung in Kwak'wala, watching the movement of the dancers as they sweep across the dirt floor, witnessing requires being fully engaged. Witnesses can then be called upon to verify what has taken place, particularly if any act of business or ceremony is questioned in the future. In this way, cultural and political knowledge is kept alive in the bodies, spirits and minds of everyone who makes up the potlatch, including witnesses. (2018, p.282)

This projects respectfully and mindfully translates the responsibilities of witnessing ceremony to responsibilities of an Indigenous woman engaged in international story-based research.

The significance of 'bearing witness' to Indigenous women's intellectual traditions of storytelling was noted by Million (2009). The relational responsibilities developed between stories and witnesses reinforce the integrity and impact of Indigenous women's knowledge. "Witnessing" as an intellectual project further acknowledges the endurance of these relationships beyond immediate exchanges or encounters. Witnesses accept responsibilities for ensuring the accuracy of, intentions behind, and relations entangled throughout the story are acknowledged and empowered during any retelling. Responsibilities accepted prior to, during, and after engaging with storytellers ensure that stories are honoured, remembered, and remain active participants in ongoing processes of consent. Embedded firmly within this practice and

method are layers of accountability and respect for the agency of the storyteller and the story itself.

As I will explore in Chapter Four, I bore witness to relations and events beyond the stories shared by Eveny and Evenki women. I participated in three significant events celebrating and invigorating urban indigeneity that simultaneously featured colonial tensions and complexities in the landscapes *KMNS* women were navigating. My participation in these events exposed me to forces and concepts I had been previously unaware of, and shifted my approach to several elements of the research, including storytelling prompts and analysis of indigenous-state relations.

2.2.3 Ethical Considerations

The responsibilities of witnessing Eveny and Evenki women's stories in Yakutsk were prominent throughout my time in the city. Much of what was shared was done in confidence but with hope that it could shed light on issues the community identified and described. Eveny and Evenki women were conscious of the potential consequences they could incur by sharing their stories but wanted their experiences to be seen and heard. Therefore, it remains my responsibility to make the stories visible without exposing the storyteller to repercussions from their families, the communities in Yakutsk, or the Russian state. Witnessing is attentive to these power dynamics and negotiations at play, as Hunt (2018) explains "[w]itnessing…might be understood as a methodology in which we are obligated, through a set of relational responsibilities, to ensure frameworks of representation allow for the lives that we have witnessed to be made visible" (p.284). This thesis, and other projects that may be a result of

the storytelling process and relationships underpinning it, will thus constitute the extension of responsibilities beyond the relationships I established in Yakutsk this past year.

The decision to work with witnessing and storytelling methodologies make the most sense for me as an Indigenous woman working alongside other Indigenous women in territories I am a visitor to. The methodological approach of witnessing described by Sarah Hunt (2018) remains mindful of the power dynamics often at play between researchers in privileged positions and the locations of those whose experiences and stories are being witnessed. When questioned about my focus on Indigenous women and their stories, the power they embody to expose the shortcomings of the relationship the Russian state has built with *KMNS*. Witnessing methodology furthers this approach, as it "means sometimes creating new language, new stories, new avenues for validating those voices that are most at risk of being erased" (Hunt, 2018, p.284). The creation of new language to celebrate the agency of urban *KMNS* women in Sakha Republic (Yakutia) is critical work taken up in this project, as stories witnessed in Yakutsk emphasized the challenges and the successes being navigated by this community.

Million (2013) celebrates the powerful trend of Indigenous women's voices threatening the stability of settler colonial legitimacy on a global scale. She unapologetically states,

> Our voices rock the boat, and perhaps the world. Our voices are dangerous. Knowing this, we must also seek to know how our Indigenous voices are mobilized in global mesh-works that are the larger spheres that inform us and in which we take action. (p.57)

These global mesh-works of kinship, mobilization, and Indigenous self-determination will be invigorated by the stories of urban indigeneity from Evenki and Eveny women living in Yakutsk.

As work on urban indigeneity in the Russian Federation remains mostly unexplored, it makes sense that issues, strategies, and stories mindfully brought to light should be narrated by the women nurturing these landscapes. As stewards of culture, language, and community, Indigenous women's storied resistances manifest dynamic multiplicities of persistent indigenous futures that unsettle and destabilize settler colonialism, heteropatriarchy, and neoliberal industrialized futures.

2.3 Methods

The methods used to prepare for the storytelling process were facilitated by of the amount of time that I was able to spend in the city, developing relationships throughout and to the urban landscape. During my first two months in Yakutsk, I became familiar with the city, developed a basic competency in Russian language, and organically met people who offered to assist me with my research in a variety of ways. For example, a young woman I met at a restaurant became a close friend and set up my initial meeting with the head of the Yakutsk-based Evenki organization. A student I met at an informal gathering eventually became my interpreter when my initial interpreter returned to Lheidli T'enneh First Nation territories (Prince George, BC) for an exchange semester; students in the dormitories gave their Eveny and Evenki friends my information to extend my research contacts; I became a regular in a small cafe that became a comfortable and relaxed setting for sharing stories over a pot of tea; my attendance at community events illuminated the different dynamics guiding interactions between local residents (Indigenous and non-Indigenous), government representatives, tourists, as well as immigrant and other communities. The length of time I spent in Yakutsk helped form connections that encouraged me to confidently proceed with research that dynamically engaged with my methodological responsibilities.

From late July until late September I witnessed 17 stories from Eveny and Evenki women. I asked women I had been previously introduced to if they were interested in sharing their stories. My contacts expanded through word of mouth, allowing women from many different backgrounds to participate in this research. Participants were between 18 and 90 years – some having lived in Yakutsk for only 2 months, others for over 40 years. Each woman was provided with an opportunity before they shared their stories to review an information letter about the research project translated to Russian (Appendix A), and guiding questions for the types of stories I was interested in also translated to Russian (Appendix B). Oral consent was ascertained repeatedly to ensure attentiveness to comfort and well-being was ongoing and centered during stories. Nearly everyone requested anonymity before or after meeting me, which will be respected throughout this thesis and after its completion.

During my fieldwork, the support of interpreters/translators was key to helping me meet Eveny and Evenki women in Yakutsk, explaining my research to them, translating their story during our meeting, and transcribing the recordings. It would have been impossible to complete this research without their assistance. The two women I worked with were both fluent in English and Russian, were enthusiastic about the research goals, and the impact my research might have upon its completion. Remarking on the attitudes my translators brought is important as translation of multi-lingual research is neither a neutral nor objective process (Wong & Poon, 2010). The women I worked with did not have formal translation training – they were both university students with rich English vocabulary and education who were eager to work on the project. While Wong and Poon (2010, p.152) argue that not any bilingual person can be a good translator, my research was committed to building relationships with urban *KMNS* women and hiring local women with *KMNS* ancestry was important to my relational

accountability. This was an important method, as healthy relationships with my interpreters demonstrated my integrity and character to the women we were meeting. Wong and Poon (2010) comment on the importance of these dynamics: “When translation is regarded as an integral step of the research process, the interactions and dynamics between the translator and the research participants may provide the researcher with additional insights about the phenomenon being studied” (p.153). Reflecting on the integral role interpretation and translation had in the successful completion of my research in Yakutsk, while there may have been aspects of it that could have been improved, overall it was a fruitful and reciprocal process for all parties.

I will briefly speak to the positionalities of my translators to establish the background for the perspectives held by those so integral to the storytelling process. I worked with two interpreters, Elena Romanova and Sardaana Sidorova. Elena came from a mixed Sakha and Evenki family, and had grown up in Yakutsk. I first met Elena on Lheidli T'enneh territories during her first semester as an exchange student at UNBC, and when I travelled to Yakutsk, she was immediately generous with her time and energy helping me settle in and navigate bureaucratic university processes. Elena is a third-year student at the Institute of Modern Languages and International Studies, associated with the North Eastern Federal University in Yakutsk. Sardaana is a second-year student in the same institute, with a specialization in the Department of English and International Studies. I met Sardaana in my first few days in Yakutsk, and she repeatedly expressed an interest in my research as we got to know each other. When Elena departed Yakutsk in August 2018, I hired Sardaana to help me complete my research. Sardaana is from a mixed Sakha and Eveny family and has lived in Yakutsk her whole life.

The cultural situatedness, relatability to younger storytellers, and familiarity with Yakutsk that Elena and Sardaana brought to my project as interpreters and colleagues enriched my experience as a researcher and visitor in Yakutsk. I am deeply grateful for the work they both did to connect me with local Indigenous organizations and representatives, for making their work schedules flexible to participants' schedules, and for their patience as I navigated the language barrier. I developed close personal and professional relations working with Elena and Sardaana, and our relationships have persisted since my return to Turtle Island and Lheidli T'enneh First Nation territories occupied by UNBC.

Upon returning to UNBC, Sardaana and I continued working together on transcribing the English and Russian on the audio recordings. All recordings were moved to an encrypted USB drive from which Sardaana worked, as audio files could not be sent over email for the ongoing security of stories. Once transcription was complete, I spent time reviewing the stories repeatedly to identify common themes and experiences by hand, cross-referencing between the English and Russian transcriptions. This process illuminated insightful connections between the stories, which are the main themes explored throughout this thesis.

2.3.1 Expectations versus Realities During Fieldwork

The proposal for this project was written in Lheidli T'enneh First Nation territories (Prince George, BC), in consultation with Dr. Fondahl and an English language literature review. However, arriving in Yakutsk and getting to know the people brought up new ideas and ideas that could not have been generated from what is currently known as Canada. Preconceived notions about anticipated findings in the proposal stage were quickly clarified by the political realities, people, and dynamics of inter-indigenous community relationships

throughout Sakha Republic (Yakutia) and its capital city Yakutsk. Despite theorizations of Indigenous women's place-making processes in the proposal for this research, several women explained that the importance of people and their relationships substantially outweighed any place-based relations in the city. Based on my previous work with urban Indigenous communities on xʷməθkwəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxw 7mesh (Squamish), and Sə̓l̓ lwətaʔ/Selilwitulh (Tsleil-Waututh) territories (Vancouver, BC), I had expected stories to emphasize places imbued with positive significance, reflecting *KMNS* processes of place-making in the city; however, realities of Indigenous place-making in Yakutsk are not straightforward. A young girl who agreed to speak with me on the condition of her friend joining us because she was frightened of the city is an effective example of the nuances I encountered. Over the course of the two months she had lived in Yakutsk, she had rarely ventured beyond the university dormitories and was unfamiliar with any other places in the city. Prior to moving to Yakutsk, she imagined the city as a foreboding and unsafe place in her mind, preventing her from engaging with it in a positive way upon arriving. The imagined geography she had generated in anticipation of life in Yakutsk narrowed her engagement with place, imagined or substantive, and became her preferred interaction with space. The dormitories were a safe place for her to adjust to life in Yakutsk, but when asked, she denied her relationship to the dorms as a form of place-making. Rather, she requested to meet in a place of my choosing on the condition her friend could join us. Her friendship was the most significant aspect of her life in Yakutsk, and it was clear from her story that her connections to people she trusted were far more significant than any place she frequented in the city.

The research questions driving this project also underwent important evolutions, as I started to realize the questions that I should ask, as opposed to the questions I had originally

conceptualized. While some of the questions I originally proposed remain urgent and relevant in a Canadian context, I quickly learned that there were different urgencies and issues around *KMNS* women to address in Yakutsk. This shift was important to embrace quickly, rather than attempting to fit preconceived questions into a landscape they clearly did not fit into.

2.3.2 Issues in Practice

One of the many challenges that I navigated in Yakutsk was the language barrier, which sometimes made feeling confident in my understanding of the tone of the story, the implicit perspectives it contained, and other nuances of the stories difficult. Even with the help of my interpreters, at times the chasm between the women and I felt unbridgeable. I am deeply grateful to my interpreters for taking on the responsibility of facilitating the storytelling to the best of their abilities and for working with me after each meeting to improve our conversations.

As stories were shared, it quickly became clear that some of my prepared questions were irrelevant or superfluous to what women wanted to share. Unfortunately, the distance and the lack of contacts with expertise in urban Indigenous community building made it impossible to pre-test the questions. However, co-investigators of the *Indigenous Territorial Rights in the Russian Federation* project with which this research is directly associated, Antonina Savvinova and Viktoriya Filippova, kindly reviewed the guiding questions to ensure that there were no obvious concerns prior to my arrival in Yakutsk. Some questions elicited detailed responses, with insightful and vulnerable reflections on life in the city, challenges of transitioning to the urban space from where they previously lived. Other questions felt disruptive to the momentum of some stories, or in the context of what was being shared did not contribute to the narrative being shared and were therefore dropped.

Another challenge was the confusion in response to requests for the story to be shared in a place that had special meaning. As noted earlier, several women clarified that connections to place through processes of place-making I had anticipated observing were not relevant. Often the places we would meet women in held no significance to them, despite requests for them to consider the many different types of meaning a place could have. We generally met in places to which women had loosely defined relationships, or in their homes where they felt safe to disclose personal stories to a foreigner. Perhaps this was an issue with the translation of requests and explanations, or it may be due to different understandings of meaning-making to place for Eveny and Evenki peoples to which I am not familiar, nor privy.

2.4 Conclusion

The importance of an Indigenous research framework to this study is embedded in the analysis of all the information that was shared and to the maintenance of accountability that this research demands. The theories, methodologies, and methods discussed in this chapter form the foundation of the rest of this thesis – from the stories central to its nature to the ideas that were generated during the storytelling processes. This research contributes to the (minimal) literature available concerned with experiences and perspectives of *KMNS* women on urbanization and urban Indigenous community building in the Russian Far East. Awareness of the power Indigenous women mobilize through their stories is not ground breaking to Indigenous community members or researchers in broader global contexts, however. This work celebrates the relationship and applicability of Indigenous theory and intellectual traditions regarding urban indigeneity developed by Indigenous writers across Turtle Island, Australia, and Aotearoa to the situations being navigated by *KMNS* in Sakha Republic (Yakutia).

Chapter Three: "Yakutization": Inter-Indigenous Relations in Yakutsk

Over the course of my fieldwork, the prolific art, language, and presence of indigeneity throughout Yakutsk dominated my observations and perceptions of city's landscape. However, visible representations of indigeneity in Yakutsk reflect almost exclusively Sakha culture,

Figure 3.1: Mural in Yakutsk depicting Sakha women in traditional regalia engaged in ceremony (photo credit: Tsatia Adzich)

indicating the city's saturation with Sakha people, stories, and their unique ethnic dominance over the space. For example, numerous murals painted on the sides of residential buildings, such as that reflected in Figure 3.1., demonstrate the unmistakeable presence of Sakha culture and people in the city, while no murals of the same scale signify *KMNS* presence or belonging. Thinking critically about Yakutsk as an 'indigenous city' made it clear that the representations of indigeneity defining Yakutsk excluded Indigenous peoples from nations other than Sakha from experiencing themselves reflected in the physicality of the city. The omnipresent normativity of Sakha iconography, art, and history in Yakutsk exerts unspoken pressures on *KMNS* arriving to the city to adopt Sakha cultural and linguistic characteristics to experience the same level of belonging procured by Sakha.

Scholars use the term "Yakutization" to describe the phenomenon of linguistic assimilation, or the replacement of *KMNS* languages with Sakha language, of *KMNS* by the Sakha peoples (Balzer, 1995; Chevalier, 2017; Sidorova, Ferguson, & Vallikivi, 2017). Yakutization refers to the linguistic pressures experienced by Even and Evenk people, in addition to the broader societal, cultural, and political pressures exerted onto *KMNS* peoples by the Sakha. Yakutization as a phenomenon in Yakutsk refers to the relational entanglements of *KMNS* in multifaceted pressures to assimilate into Sakha culture and communities. While women who shared their stories with me did not specifically used the term, most of them described feeling pressure to abandon parts of their own indigenous culture, language, or identity to feel a sense of belonging in Yakutsk. This identity shift would align them with the Sakha body politic, and reflect the prescribed characteristics associated with indigeneity in Yakutsk, where indigeneity is deeply contextual in its recognition.

In addition to the linguistic aspect of Yakutization, this chapter will acknowledge the additional pressures experienced by Eveny and Evenki women in Yakutsk, including pressures to identify publicly as Sakha rather than with their own nation, and to interact with the cityscape on terms defined by the Sakha language, culture, and traditions. While definitions and descriptions of Yakutization in the very limited English literature generally focus on the proliferation of Sakha language in non-Sakha communities, this phenomenon affects more than just the language options of Eveny and Evenki women living in Yakutsk. In the sociocultural landscape of Yakutsk, pressures to speak, behave, present, and identify as a Sakha person persists within inter-indigenous relationships throughout the city. During my fieldwork, these pressures would often be a factor in the narratives about urban Indigenous life in Yakutsk.

3.1 Layers of assimilation: Social/cultural/political dynamics between Russian, Sakha, and *KMNS* communities in Yakutsk

The layers of history, colonialism, and indigeneity that intertwine to set the stage for a contemporary analysis of urban indigeneity in the city of Yakutsk are important to sift through to discuss the nuances of the stories shared by Eveny and Evenki women. First, this section will briefly discuss Russification in Sakha Republic (Yakutia), and how it set the stage for Sakha cultural resurgence. I will then briefly analyse Sakha cultural and linguistic revitalization from the 1990s onwards, concluding with a discussion of the impressions these historical processes, Russification and Sakha cultural resurgence, have left throughout Yakutsk. Ultimately, these have had significant effects on the exertion of multifaceted pressures to assimilate into dominant cultures for Eveny and Evenki women.

3.1.1 From the Soviet Union & 'Russification' to Post-Soviet Russia & 'Yakutization'

The forceful pursuit of a common Soviet identity under the Soviet Union legitimized widespread policies of Russification – the assimilation of other ethnicities and communities into the Soviet body politic and the homogenization of language, culture, and beliefs to the hegemonic Russian. This profoundly impacted Sakha and northern Indigenous peoples (Schindler, 1997; Ferguson, 2016; Ferguson & Sidorova, 2018). Prior to the late 1980s and 1990s, policies perpetuating Russification were rigorously enforced within educational, political, and cultural landscapes (Grenoble & Whaley, 1998). Expressions of other ethnic identities – including Sakha, Evenki, and Eveny – were perceived as disloyal to the efforts by the state to unify the nation (Ferguson, 2016). Chevalier (2017) discusses this further, writing "…the valorization of Russian language was in part due to the political situation. Ethnic Sakha who spoke Sakha in public or demonstrated their Sakha identity were accused of inciting 'nationalism'" (p.616). An older Evenki woman who had been a teacher in the Soviet Union shared her experience navigating this political issue. She recalled how –

> *[Native languages] started to disappear in the 1970s. There was a ban on learning [our native languages] by the government. When I started working in the boarding schools, the head of District Department of Public Education came. I suggested to him to bring all Evenki children from every region to teach them to speak [Evenki]. He said "…don't start nationalism!"* (personal communication, 23 September 2018).

The homogenization of all ethnicities under the Soviet state is generally remembered as difficult and alienating for northern indigenous peoples, despite some older indigenous people's positive recollections of the ideals of unity and cooperation cultivated during the Soviet era (Bloch, 2004).

Policies establishing and enforcing Russian language as the dominant language in the public sphere as well as most of the educational landscapes throughout Sakha Republic (Yakutia) were a drastic change from the approaches taken during the Tsarist period (Chevalier, 2017). Language policy had previously been "primarily *de facto*; it was primarily shaped by the church officials of the era, who believed that religious and secular education should be provided in the native language" (Ferguson & Sidorova, 2018, p.28). While Russification policies did not explicitly criminalize or ban Sakha language, they coded Sakha as potentially indicative of disloyalty to the overall project of Soviet unification, cultivating a fear of using the language.

During the Soviet era, the Sakha language managed to spread through the Republic to a certain extent, despite the predominance of Russification. Sidorova, Ferguson, and Vallikivi (2017) note that,

> …over the last 70 years there was also a period of significant 'Yakutization'. The Sakha language spread through the boarding school system set up for children of reindeer herders and hunters. As a result, for most Yukaghir, Chukchi, and Eveny, the Sakha language became the main instructional language. (p.138)

What began as state amalgamation of many culturally and linguistically diverse people into a single, manageable indigenous body was carried over after the fall of the USSR, as "…just as many Sakha feared Russification during the twentieth century, so have smaller indigenous northern groups feared Sakhaisation (or 'Yakutisation') as well as Russification" (Balzer, 2006, p.578). This double-tiered phenomenon is the underlying historical landscape for the ethnic tensions between Russian, Sakha, and *KMNS* communities in contemporary Sakha Republic (Yakutia).

In early years after the fall of the USSR the revival of Sakha culture, language, and representations emerged in Sakha Republic (Yakutia) (Ferguson & Sidorova, 2018). Resistance to relentless Russification can be seen as part of the catalyst for this Sakha revival, and the subsequent increased pressures of Yakutization, as identified by Chevalier (2017):

> The city of Yakutsk has undergone major sociolinguistic changes since the Soviet period when the Sakha language was absent from the public sphere. Today, 25 years after language revitalization efforts were launched, Russian no longer dominates the public sphere of the city. Due in part to substantial efforts to revitalize Sakha language and culture, including reviving Sakha language instruction in the schools, the functional sphere of Sakha has widened considerably. The Sakha language is currently used in every sphere of public life in the city. (p.621)

Writing at the time of the major shift away from policies and strategies of Russification, Balzer & Vinokurova (1996) identify Yakutsk as having been an important site for political and linguistic shift:

> The Sakha cultural and spiritual revival…intensified in the late 1980s, leading to a campaign for rebirth of the Sakha language and literature. While only 5% of the Sakha listed their primary language as Russian in 1989, fear of linguistic Russification, especially in the capital of Yakutsk, has led to sharp monitoring of politician's language abilities, to language legislation mandating for more Sakha training in the schools and to joint 'state language' status for Sakha and Russian. (p.104)

The legacy of the legislation movements, the representation demanded of politicians, as well as the enthusiastic revalorization of Sakha language and cultural representations in the city can very clearly be seen in Yakutsk today, both in terms of the cultural presence of Sakha as well as in the consequences experienced by *KMNS*.

An older Evenk woman who had moved to Yakutsk in 1975 to work as a teacher, shared with me a memory she had of when she started teaching:

> *I think you should know your native language. I didn't forget mine, although I was teaching only Russian and literature…As I had graduated the pedagogic institute…I worked in middle schools from Grade 5 to Grade 10 teaching Russian and literature. There was no native language discipline back then. So I didn't give a class on native language, because in town there were only Russian and Sakha schools, there was no need…* (personal communication, 23 September 2018).

Much of her life as a teacher had been during the Soviet Union era, and her memories of the forbidden nature of languages other than Russian in the public sphere were distinct.

An important turning point in the sociolinguistic landscape of Sakha Republic (Yakutia) was the 1991 election of Republic President Nikolaev, a half Sakha man who initiated an important cultural and linguistic resurgence during his time in office (Balzer & Vinokurova, 1996; Chevalier, 2017). Most of the women that spoke with me had not experienced life under the Soviet Union, but one older Evenk woman shared with me her vivid memories of life before President Nikolaev. She spoke proudly of his efforts to reinvigorate Yakutsk as a place safe to express Sakha culture and language after a long period of cultural suppression:

> *I graduated high school in 1994, and half of my classmates were Russians…At those times, the head of our republic became President Nikolaev. His policies were really towards patriotic and national values…he tried to build Sakha culture. [He believed] that if you're Sakha, you should speak Sakha….So a lot of Russians, they were afraid of this because after the collapse of the USSR…a lot of Russians were pushed away from the territories where they lived. Because this was the territory of [the Sakha nation], Russians were really afraid of this happening and they became like immigrants…Sakha people started to learn about their culture, and their own language, but the relationships between Russian and Sakha people didn't change…before Nikolaev, it was forbidden to speak in our own languages, in the Sakha language...I remember my mom would cry about this. I remember her tears. I remember when one Russian woman said to her "why don't your kids speak Russian?" even though we were only five and three-year-old kids. I remember her tears, even today, because she was so angry with the Russian people. After Nikolaev came to Yakutia as president…not only Sakha but every aboriginal language started to be more free. We weren't afraid to speak in our native language anymore after we had this president.* (personal communication, 20 August 2018).

The legacy of President Nikolaev persists in Sakha Republic (Yakutia), as the cultural, political, and linguistic landscape of Yakutsk continues to celebrate and reclaim Sakha culture, language, and citizens.

3.1.2 Sakha language & inter-indigenous relationships in Yakutsk

In their analysis of the sociolinguistic landscape of Indigenous peoples in the community of Chersky, Sidorova, Ferguson, & Vallikivi (2017) point out that

> [a] most important facet of the linguistic landscape is what it can say – what evidence it can provide – about deeper processes transpiring within a society that are not visually apparent. The daily 'consumption' of these elements of the landscape may be somewhat non-reflexive, but do both reflect and affect the cultural consciousness and values of the local population. (p. 136)

This is also true for Yakutsk, as the linguistic landscape currently being cultivated provides substantial insight into the relationships between Sakha and northern Indigenous peoples, including the Eveny and Evenki.

Over the past 30 years, the reclamation and invigoration of a dominant Sakha presence in Yakutsk has contributed, in different ways, to the alienation of *KMNS* individuals and communities from the city. This exclusion has taken place with little regard or interest in the presence and persistence of *KMNS* and their traditions, identities, or languages. As one of the two official languages of the Republic, the Sakha language has, in some regards, reached equal footing to Russian language (Chevalier, 2017). Due to this, when indigeneity in Sakha Republic (Yakutia) is considered, Sakha culture and language receives more focus and interest than other Indigenous languages and culture. The expansive literature that focuses specifically on Sakha peoples and language as well as in local perceptions of the external interest in Sakha culture are evidence of this. To this point, one Even woman told me:

> *If you go outside of Yakutia, to the rest of Russia for example, they are more interested in [Sakha] culture, because the north is too far away and too small so you should know more about Sakha culture…it is more useful to know Sakha language than your own. You will earn more money if you know about the Sakha culture, and you can go further if you know more about bigger cultures, and then on to world cultures for example.* (personal communication, 19 September 2018)

This same woman later expressed that while she was interested to learn her own language, it would not be as useful to her in her educational and career goals as learning Sakha.

Overall, Sakha presence in Yakutsk has been integrated and received more positively compared to that of *KMNS* by the overarching development and nature of the city. *KMNS* women frequently mentioned their observations of Sakha culture, language, and people receiving state, federal, and global recognition in ways that *KMNS* communities and cultures did not. They equate this with Sakha people having better lives than Indigenous peoples, which serves as incentive for their assimilation, particularly as family connections to mixed *KMNS* and Sakha heritages are common. This was poignantly articulated by a young Evenki woman in response to my question about her preference for learning Sakha rather than her native language:

> *I think [people choose to speak Sakha] because Sakha people, they live better than aboriginal people. Their life conditions are better.* (personal communication, 20 August 2018)

While enthusiasm for the resurgence of Sakha language is understandable given the historical repression experienced, this attitude fails to consider the consequences *KMNS* languages have experienced as a result. As space has never been made to support the presence of *KMNS* languages in the urban setting, and Sakha languages have received substantial support, a widespread perception of *KMNS* languages as disappearing, without purpose, and restricted to rural landscapes has proliferated. The expansion of the linguistic functional sphere for Sakha since the fall of the Soviet Union has narrowed and restricted the presence and maintenance of

Even and Evenk languages even further than they were before. Multiple women expressed sentiments of disinterest or disavowal of their native languages in favour of focussing on the Sakha language. These attitudes were in response to a multiplicity of societal and cultural the pressures, which I will discuss in depth in the following section.

The exclusion of Eveny and Evenki culture (as well as the Chukchi, Yukaghir, and Dolgan) in Yakutsk fuels perceptions of northern Indigenous cultures as culturally static, unchanging and disconnected from the pace of modern, urban life. Speaking to the absence of Even and Evenk language in Sakha Republic (Yakutia) Sidorova, Ferguson, & Vallikivi (2017) argue "The languages by their very absence also underscore an exotic and unchanging image of indigenous inhabitants…their absence implies that there is no need to keep something which has no real value to modern life" (p.144). Indigenous peoples do not exclusively belong to rural landscapes, in villages, or herding reindeers: Indigenous peoples, their languages, and their cultures can thrive and be celebrated in any space that they choose to call their home, and for however long that may be. It could be argued that urban Sakha hold prejudices against *KMNS* arriving to Yakutsk reminiscent of prejudices held by Russians during the Soviet era. Some urban Sakha are unwittingly creating contemporary landscapes of ostracism and shame for *KMNS* in Yakutsk similar to those they themselves resisted in the 1980s and 1990s. The modern expansion of Sakha power, presence, and indigeneity is taking place in tandem with the perpetuation of state and societal perceptions of *KMNS* indigeneity as static and incompatible with urban space.

Ethnic tensions in Sakha Republic (Yakutia) have been constant, however, and were also noted by Balzer (1995) during the shift from Russification to Yakutization. Primarily discussing Sakha-Russian relations, she writes:

> …interethnic tension within the republic has a long history and has been growing. Tensions usually have simmered beneath the surface of calm ethnic relations, but occasionally have burst onto the surface of republic social life…*Some conflicts have historically also been part of the complex Sakha and northern native relationships, given the concerns of the numerically smaller nationalities over dual dangers of "Yakutization" as well as "Russification*". (1995, p.143, emphasis added)

Analyzing contemporary ethnic relations in Sakha Republic (Yakutia) in comparison to the historical undercurrents that have unfolded between Sakha, Russian, and *KMNS* indicates a complex and nuanced landscape with shifting and evolving power dynamics. As of this writing, inter-indigenous conflicts and tensions have not resulted in outright confrontations, instead manifesting subtly. The cultivation of subversive assimilatory social, cultural, and political forces in Yakutsk between Sakha and *KMNS* communities and individuals can primarily be observed in the opinions held by *KMNS* adapting to urban lifestyles and attempting to establish a sense of belonging in the landscape.

3.2 Eveny and Evenki experiences of Yakutization in Yakutsk

As I move beyond what has been previously written about Yakutization into what was so generously shared with me by Eveny and Evenki women in Yakutsk, it is important that I keep in mind the responsibilities I accepted as a witness to these stories. I bring up my methodological responsibilities here to re-establish their presence throughout this thesis and beyond. Quotations and ideas included throughout this chapter are small parts of much larger processes of relationship building and the overall narrative shared by Eveny and Evenki in Yakutsk and should be interacted with as such. In this section, I will bring pieces of different stories together to discuss how Yakutization has impacted the Eveny and Evenki women I met in Yakutsk. The following analysis acknowledges the commonalities amongst individual

stories, as well as expands on the particularities within each story to establish familiarity with the current landscapes and circumstances *KMNS* women in Yakutsk are navigating.

The following section seeks to understand the social, political, cultural, and linguistic intersections of Sakha assimilatory relations as they relate to *KMNS* stories of disavowing one's indigenous identity, community, and language. Pressures of Yakutization are exerted through day-to-day interactions and relationships between people, as well as through state policies that reinforce the legitimacy and presence of exclusionary forms of indigeneity in Yakutsk. A notable number of stories exposed implicit and explicit contemplations about the benefits associated with fitting into and being accepted within the Sakha community. Some women expressed a clear preference for Sakha language and culture; compromises ranged from wanting to learn Sakha (as opposed to learning their own language) to entirely shifting their identity to Sakha. Eveny and Evenki women navigating the degree to which they compromise their indigeneity to appease Sakha social, political, and cultural expectations in Yakutsk indicates pervasive systemic urban Yakutization. Examples of this coercion in stories include aggressive inquiries from Sakha people as to why they didn't speak better Sakha, or why they would identify as Even or Evenk if they cannot even speak their own language. It is also evident in disproportionate availability of structural resource, such as the access Sakha have to funding for language projects and cultural childcare and nurseries in the city. *KMNS* communities are expected to choose between either Russian or Sakha childcare and nurseries as there are no Indigenous options.

These are important stories to highlight because living in the city as an urban Indigenous woman should not require one to compromise her sense of self, to renounce her belonging to her community and/or nation, or to be limited in which culture her child can be

raised. Living in the city of Yakutsk as an Indigenous person should not be synonymous with being or speaking Sakha. Urban indigeneity around the world has proven that it has the potential to stimulate multiplicities of Indigenous pride and inter-community relations in the face of state and societal interference. Daigle (2016) argues for a dynamic approach to Indigenous self-determination –

> …Indigenous peoples have remained diverse by continually transmitting and renewing their ontologies through their languages, artistic and storytelling traditions, spiritual ceremonies, annual community gatherings, and through the harvesting and sharing of their local food…It is these ontologies and the practices in which they are transmitted…that cultivate an alternative politics for Indigenous self-determination. (p.260)

These ontologies are not isolated in static landscapes or spaces – rather, these practices can take place anywhere and are not incompatible with the city.

3.2.1 "I will identify myself now as Evenki only in my district"

Sakha cultural and linguistic dominance has made Yakutsk a challenging place to navigate for *KMNS*, as these dynamics are compounded with the challenges universally associated with transitioning and adapting to an unfamiliar place. Speaking to one young woman who had moved to Yakutsk a few months prior, I was shocked by the confidence and knowledge with which she spoke about the sociolinguistic situation of not only Yakutsk, but also the usefulness of particular languages throughout Sakha Republic (Yakutia) and beyond[9]. A student in Yakutsk, she told me unapologetically that despite feeling ashamed for not knowing her native language,

> *People learn languages to communicate with each other. It is more important to know foreign languages or bigger languages than smaller ones. It is more useful*

[9] This sentiment comes from the woman quoted on page 48 discussing the perception of Indigenous culture in Sakha Republic (Yakutia) as exclusively Sakha.

> *when it comes to moving somewhere - it can help you widen your horizons. It is better to know different languages than to know just a specific Small Numbered language. Our generation is interested in travelling to other places and achieving a lot, rather than staying in the north and learning our native language. Because we are always interested in something new, something unusual, and we want to go abroad to learn more things.* (personal communication, 19 September 2018).

She was not alone in her opinion that Sakha (and other foreign) language presents opportunities globally that Even or Evenk languages do not. In their respective Master's theses, Sivtseva (2015) and Haak (2016) both offer observations on the lacking functional sphere for Indigenous languages in urban settings in Sakha Republic (Yakutia). Other women I spoke with similarly reasoned that fitting into Sakha society, measured by competency in the language, was important for succeeding in the city, and could potentially lead to future desirable opportunities beyond Sakha Republic (Yakutia).

Some of the most powerful stories about the pressures to 'Yakutize' come from young women who are 'pass' as Sakha and consequently experience targeted pressures to speak Sakha. The pressures put on Indigenous peoples with Asian features in Yakutsk to be Sakha were emphasized by two young women, in the following excerpts from their stories:

> *We all look Asian here, and people think that I am Sakha, and they get really angry when I say that I don't know the Sakha language. They say that you should know because you are Yakutian. But I think that knowing your native language is not so important. The most important part is how you identify yourself…I am an Evenki girl, and even though I don't know my language, I still know that I am Evenki…But people say that even if you are Evenki, you should know the Sakha language because you live here in Yakutia…* (personal communication, 20 July 2018)

> *Sometimes people ask me why I can't speak the Sakha language. I think that it is a problem for all Asian people who live in Yakutsk and don't speak Sakha…people ask this question to all people who have even just a little part of Sakha blood.* (personal communication, 20 August 2018).

These statements were made by two Evenki women in their mid-20s, who had lived in Yakutsk for at least four years, and spoke neither their own language or Sakha, only Russian. Even though they both had a strong sense of belonging to their Evenki heritage, they could feel the persistent demands from the surrounding Sakha landscape for them to change, to conform to acceptable embodiments of indigeneity in Yakutsk. Despite feeling compounded pressures to adopt the linguistic norms of Yakutsk, their sense of self could not be destabilized because of their grounded sense of belonging to their community. They were aware that learning Sakha would alleviate some of the pressure they were experiencing but did not feel compelled to comply with the demands being made of them.

The case was different, however, for the youngest woman with whom I spent time. She was 18 years old and had only arrived in Yakutsk a few months prior and planned to begin university in September. In her short time living in Yakutsk, she had been inundated with the same opinions to which the others had been exposed. Without having had time to develop a strong sense of herself as an urban Evenki woman, however, she had internalized these perspectives, and she felt compelled to strategically shift how she would identify herself in Yakutsk:

> *My mom is Sakha and my father is Evenki. In my family, we actually have more Sakha blood though... [Since moving to the city] I have started to speak more and more Sakha language, and I only speak Sakha with my friends now. So I have changed a lot. I think that I will identify myself now as Evenki only in my district, because I have [Sakha] relatives and close people to me in this district…Most of my relatives who live here are Sakha*. (personal communication, 17 August 2018)

At the heart of her story and her decision to identify as Sakha while she lives and studies in Yakutsk are the relationships she feels a responsibility to cultivate and to prioritize. Further exploration into the importance of kinship relations will be central to the next chapter, but the connections between familial and kinship networks to Yakutization should be noted here.

Other young women with strong and supportive kinship networks throughout the city grounding them in their indigeneity did not feel compelled to negotiate how or where they identified as Eveny or Evenki. As most families today are mixed, with Sakha, Russian, and *KMNS* in their families somewhere or at some time, considerations of the influence these different ethnic relations have on how young *KMNS* women interact with the systemic phenomenon of Yakutization in the city are critical.

3.3 Eveny and Evenki Language in Yakutsk

Interactions with the Russian and Sakha languages in Yakutsk produced several divergent attitudes held by the Eveny and Evenki women with whom I spoke about their relationships to their own language. Stories about these relationships are explored in three separate but fundamentally interconnected categories: a disinterest or rejection of their native language; a desire to learn (at some point) their native language; and a fluency in their native language. Other important characteristics of these categories are where the woman grew up, and the strength of their connection(s) to an urban or non-urban community. These characteristics connect these categories because of the relationships that define and validate these perspectives, whether with parents, urban kin, or a concrete sense of belonging in a home territory.

3.3.1 "I don't want to take it into my mind…I don't want to learn"

This section highlights the stories of Indigenous women who explicitly refuse to learn their native languages, and the different reasons for their rejections of this aspect of their identity. A young Even student who had travelled from her northern village to pursue an education and had lived in Yakutsk for almost three years. She was a vibrant and friendly

young woman, and our time spent together was filled with laughter and a blossoming friendship. She opened up to me quickly about how she felt about her indigeneity, and the struggles she was having in the city. Due to limited funding options for her education, she had enrolled in a program to become a teacher of her native language because of a government scholarship, which is not uncommon (Sivsteva, 2015). She repeatedly expressed a desire to switch programs or to graduate and pursue a career that would not require her to speak Eveny. One of the reasons she shared with me for her firm lack of interest in the language was because nobody spoke Eveny in her home village. Combined with the dominant attitudes in Yakutsk perpetuating views of the lack of function of Even language, she felt anxiety about her Eveny identity. Her dilemma was further compounded by societal and political perceptions being Eveny was not only incompatible with the city, but if she were to be accepted as an Eveny person she needed to speak her native language. She told me,

> *I'm scared for people to know that I am Eveny…Maybe they will also be Eveny and they will know the native language and try to speak with me in Even. But I don't know the language. And I don't even have the wish to learn or to study Even language. I don't want to take it into my mind. I try to push it away. The professors in my institute want us to be fluent in the Eveny language, but I don't want to learn…* (personal communication, 21 August 2018)

Witnessing the vulnerability embedded within her story contrasted with the other Indigenous women who had shared their deep desires to learn was a profound responsibility. She was one of few people in Yakutsk with access to rigorous opportunities to engage her native language, but she had internalized characterizations of her native language as without use to the point she distanced herself from it. However, in order to receive a university degree, she had enrolled in this program. This mindset is not uncommon in the North-Eastern Federal University in Yakutsk: in her thesis on Evenki language revitalization, Sivtseva (2015) observed: "…in case

of the Evenki language teacher program, there are some students who are not interested in learning the Evenki language, but [sic] 'just getting their scholarship'" (p.71).

While the woman mentioned above was the only person I spoke with formal engaged with her native language who felt apathetic towards Indigenous language revitalization, other women were also disconnected from their language. I spent nearly two hours walking around the city with the first woman who agreed to meet me, during which time she only briefly referred to her Evenki language:

> *I have had opportunities, but I don't really want to learn [my native language]*. (personal communication, 20 July 2018).

Another woman with whom I spoke had been raised in the city by her mom. She had had opportunities to learn Eveny language, but had similarly never taken an interest in learning it:

> *[If I wanted to learn my language] I could go with my mother to the lectures on Even language in NEFU. I could go there, but I don't. Maybe because I can learn from my mom… My mom and I had an idea to learn Even, just so that no one else could understand us. It would be like a secret language. I would also love to learn Even to pass it on to my own children, to teach them…but for me right now there is no use in learning it.* (personal communication, 19 September 2018).

It is interesting to note that in addition to her lack of motivation to learn her language at the time we met, she also reveals her perception of the Eveny language as useless in the city beyond 'secretly' communicating with her mother. Sivtseva notes in her Masters thesis on "Evenki-ness":

> In fact, there is no context for the Evenki language use. There are few platforms to use Evenki, most of them are somewhat artificial. Once a week a TV show in Evenki called "Gevan" (Gevan means sunrise in *Evenki)* is broadcast for 15-30 minutes by the national Yakut TV channel…A newspaper for the indigenous people of Yakutia is published once a month. Unfortunately, indigenous languages take up one page in it, the rest being published in Russian and Yakut. (2015, p.69)

Sivtseva includes a quote from one of her interview participants that echoes the sentiments of the women with whom I spoke who do not care if they can learn their native language:

> *Our language (Evenki) has no practical use. We do not have the sphere to use it as a functioning language. A language must have a function to survive. Only if we get autonomy where the Evenki language has all functions can we say that it has a real chance of survival" (Informant C).* (2015, p.69)

If this woman were to learn her language, it would be only so that her mother and her could furtively communicate in public – it is unclear as to whether it would reaffirm her sense of belonging to the Eveny community or reinvigorate the presence of Eveny culture in the city. However, if there were more opportunities for Eveny or Evenki languages to be used and learned, perhaps this attitude could shift, and she would see her native languages as valuable and functional in Yakutsk.

3.3.2 "Language is part of being part of a nation…"

While some women with whom I spoke made it clear that they were not interested in learning their language, it was common for those that couldn't speak their language to express a desire to learn it, either immediately or at some point in the future. An example of this was the story shared by a young Eveny woman studying theatrical management in Yakutsk. Our meeting started out notably formal but ended with her sharing a deeply moving and significant revelation for her personally. She grew up in an Eveny "compact living areas" (a region with *KMNS* constituting more than 30% of the population) and, despite having formally learned few Eveny traditions and practices as a child, she expressed an unshakeable Eveny identity. After asking her to describe her life as an Eveny woman in the city of Yakutsk, and if she experienced her indigeneity differently in the city than in her home territory, she concluded her story by sharing:

> *I just realized that I am not so interested in my culture. I need to learn more about it, I think. All people need to learn more about their culture. I want to learn more…about my language, because not very many [Eveny] people speak their language. And when I will have kids, I will want them to know their language too.* (personal communication, 22 September 2018)

Sharing her experiences as an Eveny woman in the city created a space for this young woman to realize her desire to learn her language as a way to reflect her connection to her culture.

While the previous woman did not offer many details as to why she had not learned more traditional practices or language, other women shared deeply personal details about their family and why they wanted to master their native language. The following story is from a 29-year old Evenki woman who had only recently embraced her indigenous identity. She was deeply generous with the detailed memories she shared –

> *My grandparents did not care about their children – they sent my mother and my aunts to an orphanage, and it was very difficult…I think it is the reason my mom does not speak her native language, and she does not want to learn. Maybe because she has bad memories of when she was a little girl and it was a very difficult time. She grew up very poor…Maybe that is why she doesn't want to learn [Evenki]. In my family, we only speak in Russian. That's why I don't speak my native language…but over the past year, I have wanted to study my native language. And my aunt, she wants to teach me. She always tells me stories about her life…it's very interesting.* (personal communication, 16 August 2018).

Deeply engrained intergenerational traumas resulting in discontinued language and cultural knowledges are challenging to overcome, but her determination to learn her language as a single working mother after spending most of her life disconnected from her Evenki heritage is inspiring. Acknowledging the important role that her kinships play in her reconnection to language and culture signifies to the importance of urban kinship relations. She explained the important mentorship role taken on by her aunt to guide her journey learning about her heritage:

> *Honestly, when I was in school, I never told people that I was Evenki. I said that I was Russian. I had different eyes, and different skin, so I was very shy. But when I became an adult, I changed my mind. Now, I don't think that it is a bad thing to be Evenki – I thought it was when I was younger because our Republic had other*

> *attitudes…At school, many children didn't understand and when they saw other children who looked different, they bullied them. So that is why I never said who I was. But now my aunt helps me. She has told me many stories, and I always want more, more, more! I am fascinated…* (personal communication, 16 August 2018).

Sivtseva (2015) acknowledges the role of family and kinship in reclaiming and revitalizing Eveny and Evenki language in her work. In the context of the cultivation of a sense of "new Evenkiness", the larger phenomenon behind language revitalization in Sakha Republic (Yakutia), she argues that it is all happening through relationships. "…new Evenkiness is creating solidarity among Evenki people…The interest towards a mother tongue also unites people and makes people feel the need in the common platform to learn mother tongue with like-minded people" (2015, p.82). The significance of kinship relations to successful language revitalization and reclamation are found throughout Indigenous literatures and theory worldwide, forming the foundation of Lindsay Keegitah Borrows book *Otter's Journey through Indigenous Language and Law* (2018) on the role of storytelling in Indigenous language and legal revitalization, and numerous other publications. There are clear connections between the cultivation of kinships and the resurgence of Indigenous languages, both in the stories witnessed by this project as well as throughout Indigenous literatures and networks.

The impact that relationships have on people's interest in learning Indigenous languages is further illustrated by stories shared by young women who had attended the event "Suglan" (the Evenki word for meeting). The event spanned three days, and brought nearly 50 Eveny, Evenki, and other *KMNS* youth from around Sakha Republic (Yakutia) to engage in sports, language, dance, and community building in Yakutsk. I attended this event to discuss my research on a panel with government officials and Indigenous representatives from local and

regional organizations. A young Eveny woman I connected with there shared her reasons for attending the event alongside other young *KMNS* from around Sakha Republic (Yakutia):

> *My father is Sakha, and my mother is Eveny. My mother doesn't know very much about being Eveny though – our other relatives know, but they are not near to us. I came to Suglan because I want to know more about Eveny culture. I want to speak Eveny very much. I also want to know what our national holidays are, about what kinds of events there are, and what famous people are Eveny.* (personal communication, 15 September 2018).

During my time at Suglan, I witnessed substantial representation and use of Indigenous languages by young men and women throughout the event – during meals, while playing sports, and around the fire in the evening. Another young woman who attended Suglan also commented on this when I asked her about different places in Yakutsk that she felt pride and a sense of belonging as Evenki:

> *One place I felt this was at Suglan. It was my first time there, because before I had never even heard about such a gathering. I met a lot of people, a lot of young people who actually knew their language – Eveny language, Evenki language, and I was so shocked by this. I don't know my language…* (personal communication, 17 August 2018).

Returning to the argument that Indigenous languages need functionality to be regarded as useful or beneficial, environments created by events like Suglan, where Indigenous languages are normalized and celebrated amongst youth, are clearly fertile. This challenges public and scholarly opinions that Indigenous language revitalization can only happen in spaces associated with traditional economic practices and ways of life (Mamontova, 2014). Recognizing the impact land-based cultural practices and ways of life have on increasing the functionality of Indigenous languages, such as villages primarily populated by reindeer herders or on the taiga, Sivtseva (2015) also incorporates the opportunities presented by contemporary landscapes, including those of fashion and trends amongst youth correlating with wider cultural imaginations. She writes:

> During my fieldwork I have met many young people who are interested in Evenki language. They are motivated to learn it and make it the primary language of their communication. According to them, many trends have arisen the last decade…an "indigenous" fashion – ethnic styled wear/clothes has become a new trend… (p.78).

One of Sivtseva's informants importantly comments on the future possibilities of reinvigorating youth interest in Indigenous languages, reflecting the potential for language revitalization cultivated in spaces like Suglan:

> *"Popularization in the sense, for example, when the youth of Iengra* [an Evenki village in southern Yakutia] *began to record tracks in Evenki, it became very popular, immediately it got trendy and cool to speak Evenki. In order to preserve the language, there should be a fashion for the language" (Informant B)"* (2015, p.78).

Stories shared by those who had attended Suglan reflect an excited sense of intrigue and interest in the languages, which may motivate them in the future to seek out other indigenous events, spaces, or communities to learn more. Moreover, the relationships formed with other youth and community members during the event are at the heart of their desire to learn their language.

The following excerpt came from a young woman who invited me to her home to be vulnerable and protected when she shared her story with me. Being in her home, in her private space, made the time we spent together intimate and deeply meaningful to both of us. Firmly rooted in her culture and her traditions, highly educated with multiple university degrees, and an innovative entrepreneur, she drew inspiration from Evenki artistic traditions to incorporate and celebrate her indigeneity in all areas of her life. As she shared all of this with me, she expressed hope that in the future there would be opportunities for her to learn her language -

> *Of course I would like [to learn my native language]. It would be really great if they would teach us the Evenki language because you can feel yourself a real Evenki if you know your language. Language is part of being part of a nation…we are mixing with other nations, and so that is why it is really important to at least keep our language.* (personal communication, 15 August 2018)

Despite how much of her Evenki heritage and cultural traditions were incorporated already into her business, her marriage, and her urban lifestyle, she still held aptitude in her indigenous language in the highest regard, and crucial to being Evenki. "*Language is part of being part of a nation"* is a notion that can have a profound impact on an Indigenous sense of self, especially when there so many other forces in Yakutsk working to destabilize *KMNS* confidence and assertions of their diverse indigeneity.

Indigenous languages are one of the fundamental pillars of Indigenous peoplehood (Holm, Pearson, & Chavis, 2003), but a person's disconnection from their language should not invalidate their indigeneity or belonging to an indigenous community. There are numerous reasons Indigenous peoples do not or are unable to speak their language, as previously illustrated. The significance of language abilities was stressed to me when a young Evenki woman declined to meet me simply because she did not speak her language and did not feel she deserved to be recognized as Evenki by a foreigner. This was a profound interaction for me, as I tried to reassure the young woman that what she had to say was important and valuable, whether or not she spoke her language. In her discussion on the awakening of a new sense of what it means to be Evenki in Sakha Republic (Yakutia), Sivtseva (2015) refers to the importance of language in developing and accepting this sense of self. She writes:

> The language component of an identity is often fundamental. Through the language one may feel [sic] as if they are representative of an ethnic group, by expressing one's feelings by means [sic] of their mother tongue. One can identify oneself with one's own ancestors, read literature and folklore, and gain historical knowledge and awareness about one's own culture and ethnic group. (p.77)

3.3.3 "It is like fresh air for me": Dance Ensembles and Indigenous Knowledge Sharing

There are few fluent Eveny and Evenki language speakers in Yakutsk, so I am grateful to have met several, all of whom shared their vigorous sense of self with me. Women who were fluent in their language had strong community connections throughout and beyond Yakutsk. Fluency in Eveny or Evenki language often complements membership and belonging in dance ensembles, which are fertile spaces for urban Indigenous community development and nurturing positive relationships to indigeneity for youth.

One woman fluent in Evenki language discussed taking on a leadership role in a dance ensembles after having struggled when she first arrived in the city. When she moved to the city for her education, she struggled to find a dance ensemble to cultivate a sense of community for herself in, and to speak her language with other Evenki speakers. She wanted to create a generative space for young Indigenous women to come together, to perform, and to be part of a community that would support them in the city. For her, at the center of it all is the language:

> *I try to teach our [Evenki] language. For example, when we practice new songs, I always learn them and teach them… [Our dance ensemble] is more like a club, because we don't only dance and sing, we do national sports, national games, and we keep our traditions and try to keep our language.* (personal communication, 20 August 2018).

I will further delve into the importance of dance ensembles and the community kin networks they promote in the city in Chapter 4, but the part they play in nurturing language proficiency and creating opportunities to share this knowledge is worth noting here. Another young woman who had moved to Yakutsk several years prior, leaving her northern village and family to attend university, connected her relationship with her parents back in her home and her sense of self with the language opportunities she has access to in the dance ensemble:

> *I am connected mostly with Eveny culture because [even though] my mother is Sakha, she speaks mostly to me in Eveny. She is fluent in Eveny language…[In my dance ensemble] we sing in Eveny, and also perform Eveny dances.* (personal communication, 17 August 2018).

Despite my clear communication throughout different events, community spaces, and social gatherings that my research was specifically focussed on women, I spoke with a young man who was an active volunteer in an Indigenous organization based in Yakutsk and was eager to be part of my research. The stories that he shared with me were much different than those shared with me by women, even though he firmly believed that there would be no differences between what he told me and what women would share. His expression of self, and how he perceived himself (and, by extension, others) as an Eveny man stood out to me as an emphatic and fixed understanding of indigeneity. It is likely that his sense of self was similarly shaped by the same social, political, and cultural forces in the other stories shared with me, but his relationship to them manifested differently as a man.

> *I would say that I cannot call myself an Even if I don't know my language, if I don't know my traditions. A person who doesn't know their language and their traditions is a person with no roots, without their past. My face doesn't look Eveny, but what I do, what language I speak, and what traditions I have tell people that I am Even.* (personal communication, 13 September 2018).

Reflecting on the perspectives and encounters with women that had revealed to me the significance of speaking one's language in contrast to the adamant assertions of his embodiment of indigeneity interweaving his stories, there was a clear gendered difference in how these attitudes are internalized and expressed. While this was the only man I did a recorded interview with, the encounter was striking because his forceful assertion of his indigeneity was coupled with a simultaneous denigration of indigenous people who do not know their language or traditions.

While some women also regarded language as being fundamental to accurately representing their communities and nations, underscoring most perspectives was a compassionate awareness of the reasons this may not be possible. Women fluent in their languages have empathy for and a desire to support those who are not fluent, rather than the dismissiveness of 'root-less, past-less identities' expressed by the young man. This is evident in the outlook that was shared with me by one young fluent Eveny woman who, rather than judging those that could not speak the language or did not know their traditions, was passionate about sharing her knowledge –

> *I fluently speak my language. It is important for me to share it with the rest of my dance troupe. It is like fresh air for me. I think that through my ensemble, I fulfill my lack of home and speaking my mother tongue because I usually speak to my parents [in Even]. I feel it is the same for my team mates.* (personal communication, 20 September 2018).

She went on to say, when asked about young Indigenous people in the city who did not know their language or their traditions:

> *It is not a secret that people tend to forget their culture and their languages [when they come to the city] and it is very important to give them knowledge, even the smallest amount, about the language, the culture, and the traditions…I have never met a person who thinks that it is not important to know their culture. It is really important to know, and I think that for every person, regardless of their ethnicity, it is important to know your own language, culture, and traditions.* (ibid, personal communication, 20 September 2018).

The instinct to support, mentor, and share cultural knowledge with urban *KMNS* community members is an example of the inspiring resilience embodied by urban Indigenous women. By using their language knowledge and skills to create, nurture, and maintain *KMNS* community connections in Yakutsk, women who are fluent in their indigenous languages are important role models to young *KMNS* men and women. They are not role models simply because they speak Even or Evenk language, however; they are role models because they understand the

responsibilities to their relations in Yakutsk to share this knowledge and imagine a future that acknowledges the compatibility of *KMNS* indigeneity with the city.

3.4 Conclusion

The legacy of Russification and the impacts of Yakutization on *KMNS* throughout Sakha Republic (Yakutia) can clearly be seen when the intersections of linguistic and cultural senses of belonging felt by Indigenous women in the city are explored. While the clearest impacts of Yakutization are *KMNS* linguistic disruption and absorption, the phenomenon is also shifting how *KMNS* identity is embodied and performed depending on the social, political, or cultural context in relation to the presence of Sakha. In Yakutsk, *KMNS* identities are embodied differently depending on how safe and accepted they feel.

The repackaging and discussion by Puar (2012) of John Phillips's (2006) concept 'assemblage' as it relates to identity and the many discreet characteristics that inform the whole may account for some aspects of *KMNS* navigation of Yakutization: "Assemblage" is actually an awkward translation of the French term *agencement*" she writes, going on to explain how the term captures the fluidity of identity:

> "The original term means design…arrangement, and relations – the focus being not on content but on relations, relations of patterns…In *agencement,* as John Phillips explains, specific connections with other concepts is precisely what gives them their meaning. Concepts do not prescribe relations, nor do they exist prior to them; rather, relations of force, connection, resonance, and patterning give rise to concepts. (2012, p.57)

The distinct individual embodiments of Eveny and Evenki women's indigeneity in the city should be thought about in terms of an unbounded indigeneity cultivated and supported by differently nourished relationships. An 'assemblage of indigeneity', or a strategic and deliberate embodiment and performance of the multiplicities of indigeneity, is a useful

perspective to understand this from. Careful considerations of power dynamics between all relations present, cultural landscape(s) being navigated, and the contexts in which indigeneity has been deemed (in)compatible with the city threads throughout the stories in this chapter. Such characteristics supports the practicality of engaging *KMNS* indigeneity in Yakutsk, a spatiality saturated with Yakutization, as fluid, contextual, and constantly in relation assemblages.

The impacts of Yakutization on *KMNS* women who shared stories and built relationships are undeniable, but that is not what should be interpreted as defining aspects of indigeneity in Yakutsk. It could be easy to let the consequences of Russification and Yakutization define Eveny and Evenki women's lives in the city and discourage them from being proud of their *KMNS* heritage, their communities, and their acheivements as vibrant Indigenous women; but those are not the only stories they have to tell. Every idea, memory, and goal shared with me was compelling, and indicative of a nuanced maintenance of indigeneity, in its many manifestations and relationships. One Evenki woman shared with me that while her time living in Yakutsk was not without struggle, when she first arrived in Yakutsk,

> *…I fell in love. I think the city has more opportunities [than anywhere else]. For example, here you can realize yourself. You can open up, not only to the city, but to the whole world…* (personal communication, 15 August 2018).

Living, working, and studying in the city should not be synonymous with renouncing *KMNS* indigeneity for Sakha. All *KMNS* should have the chance to come to Yakutsk and fall in love with the opportunities available to them, and to be supported by other *KMNS* people navigating the same possibilities.

An important nuance to conclude this discussion of Yakutization with is the balance between Indigenous peoples and communities' rights to continually develop based on their interactions and relations with other cultures and communities, and the settler-colonial inclination to assimilate Indigenous cultures perceived as vulnerable. Yakutization presents complex and multifaceted questions to be addressed surrounding the inter-Indigenous tensions that immediately appear assimilative and oppressive in nature yet should simultaneously be viewed with a critical understanding of Indigenous self-determination. While the stories shared with me by Evenki and Eveny women depict Yakutization as indicative of a tumultuous relationship between Sakha and *KMNS,* how are Sakha culture, relations, and ideas being adapted to invigorate and perpetuate Evenki and Eveny cultures moving forward? We must ask questions about the persistence of Indigenous cultures, peoples, and identities despite deeply engrained settler-colonial impacts from Russian society, and their tenacity in the face of Sakha influence. As John Borrows (2009) argues, settler-colonial legal systems

> …have been loath to view us as contemporary peoples who retain rights when we interact with other cultures…These doctrines are widespread throughout the world. Judicial stereotypes imply that Indigenous political communities are inferior to those that arrived subsequently, because only non-Indigenous states and peoples are given the privilege of moving through time with unfettered power relative to pre-existent societies. (p.414)

While Sakha peoples complicate this argument with their own mobility as Indigenous peoples, political standing, and privileged positions in Sakha Republic (Yakutia), we must tread cautiously exploring Yakutization further so as to not ingenuously replicate the same essentializing narratives of Indigenous authenticity and stagnancy. Community-based strategies emanating from Evenki and Eveny women leaders and advocates aimed at promoting belonging for their kin in Yakutsk while simultaneously addressing Yakutization are

innovative cultural expressions drawing on Indigenous intellectual, social, and political traditions, as will be explored in the following chapter.

Chapter 4: Indigenous Self Determination: Transforming Urban Spatialities Through Kinship and Dance Ensembles

This chapter defines and explores Indigenous self-determination from a critical Indigenous feminist perspective and discusses how urban Indigenous communities in the city of Yakutsk embrace it. Specifically, it examines *KMNS* dance ensembles as methods of community building based in kinship networks. Dance ensembles as 'woven' kinship networks, alongside blood kin, blend traditional ideas of kinship with contemporary strategies for transforming urban spatialities and connecting Indigenous communities. Indigenous women's stories indicate widespread reliance and participation in these kinships for a variety of purposes, including the transformation of urban spaces previously marked as incongruous with Indigenous life into spaces abounding with vibrant indigeneity.

4.1 Defining Indigenous Self Determination

Indigenous self-determination on a collective level represents a foundational movement, value, and assertion for Indigenous communities around the world as we persistently refuse to disappear, assimilate, or conform to colonial and settler expectations. On an individual level, self-determination "means the ability to choose how to identify one's experience, sovereignty over one's body, and respect for the decisions a person makes over their own lives today" (Simpson, 2017, p.113). Currently, no single definition can be universally agreed upon regarding how Indigenous self-determination manifests, where it starts, or Indigenous governance structures, communities, or individuals attaining it (Kuokkanen, 2019). However, characteristics of self-determination are observable in Indigenous-led movements and community developments as we increasingly determine our own political destinies (Belanger, 2010). Indigenous self-determination thus empowers

boundless and dynamic evolutions of identities, relationships, and spatialities. Regardless of location or geography, Indigenous self-determination creates, nourishes, and imagines communities differently depending on the economic, political, and cultural systems that Indigenous peoples are entangled in. It is from this celebratory perspective and engagement with diverse spatialities of Indigenous self-determination that this chapter proceeds.

4.1.1 UNDRIP, Indigenous Women, and Self-Determination

One of the most widely cited definitions of self-determination as it applies to Indigenous peoples collectively was ratified in 2007 by the United Nations General Assembly in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) (UN, 2007). This definition emphasizes "self-determination as a foundational right and principle that gives rise to other central Indigenous rights such as free, prior, and informed consent stipulated in a number of articles vis-à-vis development of Indigenous peoples' lands, territories, and resources; forcible relocation; cultural and intellectual property; and states' legislative or administrative measures" (Kuokkanen, 2019, p.2). Inclusion of this definition in UNDRIP stemmed from substantial labour by numerous global Indigenous organizations, nations, and individuals, and remains a significant achievement for international Indigenous advocacy.

For many Indigenous advocates and organizations, UNDRIP was empowering and believed to be a meaningful step towards redefining Indigenous and settler relations. Henderson (2008) details the history of international Indigenous advocacy contributing to the inclusion of self-determination as a foundational tenant of UNDRIP, much of which was grounded in human rights covenants and thought. However, while the Declaration asserts Indigenous rights deserve recognition, respect, and protection, no mechanisms hold settler states accountable. Furthermore, overstating individual rights without acknowledging their

translation to relational responsibilities and compassionate community development limits the Declaration's ability to recognize the importance of grounded community leadership roles taken on by women. Specifically, these roles rigorously challenge settler-colonial gender violence, internalized patriarchal structures in Indigenous communities, and expand Indigenous self-determination beyond male and settler imaginations.

Shortcomings of the UNDRIP and male-dominated conversations regarding Indigenous self-determination profoundly impact Indigenous women (Kuokkanen, 2012, 2019; Green, 2014). Ongoing impacts of colonization and imperialism have made both women's and Indigenous rights movements hostile to Indigenous women, deeming their participation as detracting from the specific goals of each movement (Parisi & Corntassel, 2007; Kuokkanen, 2012; Green, 2017). On Turtle Island, Indigenous male leaderships and patriarchal community governance structures have not welcomed Indigenous women's activism around women's specific issues. Indigenous feminist advocacy around disparate gendered consequences of colonialism, sexism, and racism were "…harshly criticized for being anti-Indian and accused of betraying the self-determination struggles and of cooptation into colonial, Western discourses of individualism" (Kuokkanen, 2012, p.235). Indigenous women often remain underrepresented in formal discussions concerning Indigenous self-determination, evident in the narrow definitions developed by scholars and organizations that fail to include and celebrate the unique and resilient self-determination Indigenous women embody and impart.

The scarcity of Indigenous women's voices and perspectives in rights-centric concepts of Indigenous self-determination is evident throughout the UNDRIP. Broadly, Indigenous women are specifically mentioned in only three of the 46 articles. Disappointingly, these

articles "…problematically positions Indigenous women inherently as vulnerable, categorizing them with children and elders without acknowledging that in most cases, women's vulnerability is constructed by patriarchal relations of power and is a result of the prevalent gender discrimination and subjugation in society" (Kuokkanen, 2019, p.28). Furthermore, the superficially "gender-neutral" discussion of consent and violence in the context of resource and economic development projects neglects eloquent responses from Indigenous women and communities highlighting the numerous gendered consequences of these projects. In 2013, the United Nations formally recorded the term *environmental violence,* developed by the International Indian Treaty Council and other Indigenous women-led organizations. This term identifies

> …the disproportionate and often devastating impacts that the conscious and deliberate proliferation of environmental toxins and industrial development (including extraction, production, export and release) have on Indigenous women, children and future generations, without regard from States or corporations for their severe and ongoing harm. (Women's Earth Alliance & Native Youth Sexual Health Network, 2016, p.14)

This is just one example of the important work being done by Indigenous women to bring attention to the importance of considering gender differences and leadership when conceptualizing self-determination. Marginalization and violence against Indigenous women remains unremedied by human nor women's rights discourses, indicating the importance of conceptualizing Indigenous self-determination from a gendered perspective.

Rights serve important and necessary functions in ongoing struggles for equality and challenging injustices on a global scale, but ultimately efficacy on the ground reveals their meaningfulness. Philosopher Onora O'Neill (2000) notes: "…talking as if rights were the *core* of justice, and rights for women the *core* of justice for women, is a lazy way of talking and of thinking, which systemically obscures what we would most need to think about and do if we

were to take rights seriously" (emphasis original, p.98). Dangers of expecting rights to achieve justice and meaningful change for Indigenous communities are clearly gendered. While rights continually fail to address everyday challenges and structural obstacles Indigenous women navigate, in the same breath they enshrine and reinforce colonial power of heteronormative Indigenous male leadership (Denetdale, 2009; Native Youth Sexual Health Network & Women's Earth Alliance, 2016). An example of this is the reification of 'tradition' as characterizing authentic indigeneity, used as a justification for the absence of Indigenous women from Indigenous governance structures (Sieder & Barrera, 2017, p. 634). While a rights discourse may contribute to addressing interlocking structures of settler-colonial gender violence, patriarchy, white supremacy, and capitalism, realities facing Indigenous women globally necessitate alternative and subversive approaches to dismantling these structures.

4.1.2 Settler State Responses to Indigenous Self-Determination

Settler responses to Indigenous self-determination are often intransigent, arising from reactions laden with hostility and refusal to destabilize the colonial status-quo. This was evident in the major opposition to the initial ratification of UNDRIP from four major settler-colonial states (USA, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand) with Indigenous populations, all of whom voted against ratification because of the 'contentious' inclusion of self-determination (Henderson, 2008; Wilt, 2017). Other settler colonial states such as Russia chose to abstain from the vote. State and institutional opposition to Indigenous self-determination is often based on the fundamental misconception that these assertions will ultimately lead to demands for secession from colonial states. This idea stems from an aversion to connections between self-determination and decolonization. James Anaya (2000) clarifies how these two concepts are connected:

> The resistance towards acknowledging self-determination is implying rights for literally all peoples is founded on the misconception that self-determination in its fullest sense means a right to independent statehood, even if the right is not to be exercised right away or is to be exercised to achieve some alternative status. This misconception is often reinforced by reference to decolonization, which has involved the transformation of colonial territories into new states under the normative aegis of self-determination. (p.103)

Belanger (2010) discusses recent conceptual transformations away from narrow foci equating self-determination with territorial sovereignty to meaningfully understanding the roles individuals play in the creation and development of communities. While some advocates of self-determination pursue independence from colonial states, most community-based affirmations of self-determination are concerned with invigorating and developing Indigenous communities, our responsibilities to each other, to the land, and to all forms of life. Relations between humans, ancestors, animals, the spirit world(s) remain integral to Indigenous worldviews and governing systems, as these manifestations of self-determination embody the same mobility and dynamism as Indigenous communities. Shifting between, amongst, and throughout urban/rural spatialities are these relations, defiant and unconcerned with settler colonial comprehensions of diverse assertions of self-determination. These assertions are subversively woven into the fabric of Indigenous communities as they constantly redefine and reorganize themselves spatially, culturally, politically, and economically.

4.1.3 Relational Self-Determination

Political scientist Glen Coulthard from the Yellowknives Dene First Nation identifies the importance of Indigenous values and worldview to achieving Indigenous self-determination:

> The goal of any traditionally rooted self-determination struggle ought to be to protect that which constitutes the 'heart and soul of Indigenous nations: a set of values that challenge that homogenizing force of Western liberalism and free-market capitalism; that honor the autonomy of individual conscience, non-coercive authority, and the deep interconnection between human beings and other elements of creation. (2014, p.35)

While the features identified by Coulthard are undoubtedly important, I argue that relationships of care, resistance, and persistence originating with Indigenous women are 'the heart and soul of Indigenous nations'. Mohawk grandmother and midwife Katsi Cook beautifully articulates this responsibility, writing "Women are the first environment. We are privileged to be the doorway to life. At the breast of women, the generations are nourished and sustained. From the bodies of women flow the relationship of these generations both to society and to the natural world. In this way the earth is our mother, the old people said. In this way, we as women are earth" (2003, Indian Country Today). Cook's words demonstrate the inextricable relationality Indigenous women carry, indicating the necessity of their leadership and encompassing involvement in shifts towards relational self-determination. The inseparability of Indigenous women from the creation, nourishment, and growth of Indigenous communities must be recognized in any movement or negotiation proclaiming Indigenous self-determination. Reimagining the scalar politics of self-determination as connecting the well-being and futurities of Indigenous women, Two-spirit siblings, and other non-binarized kin to those of our lands and territories reframes Indigenous self-determination as an inherently gendered movement that cannot ignore the ongoing state violences targeting Indigenous women's bodies (Hunt, 2015; Simpson, 2015). Without the leadership of Indigenous women and gender-expansive kin in systems designed to exploit and disappear Indigenous peoples, Indigenous self-determination would not boast the strong foundations it stands on today.

The intersections of women's leadership are articulated by journalist Heather Gies (2015) in her breakdown of the responsibilities Indigenous women have in transforming colonial and capitalist systems:

> Indigenous women's resistance—rooted in community, future generations, and ancestral struggles for land and livelihood—is a feminist resistance, but it is also

> fundamentally anti-capitalist and anti-imperial, demanding respect and protection not only of women's bodies, but also of land, water, mother earth, culture, and community. (Gies, 2015)

Indigenous women constantly navigate these responsibilities as we work to ensure the continuity and health of our communities in the face of ongoing destructive forces, while simultaneously supporting and enriching ambitious ideas for self-determination.

Relational Indigenous self-determination, then, depends on reciprocal dialogues amongst governance structures, men, women, non-binarized gender kin, youth, elders, animals, land, ancestral relations, and the constellations of responsibilities connecting community members. Participation in these dialogues from Indigenous governance structures that include community defined and culturally-specific systems as well as those imposed by settler state understandings of mobility, relations, and cultures play different roles, with their contributions contextual and constantly shifting. As these dynamics are explored and reconfigured, we move towards "…spatialities of belonging that do not bind, contain, or fix our relationships to land and each other in ways that limit our definitions of self and community" (Goeman, 2013, p.11). Communities are free to define themselves and their relations in response to constant exchanges with physical, political, social, psychological, historical, linguistic, economic, cultural, and spiritual spaces (Tuhawai Smith, 2012). Maori scholar Tuhiwai Smith notes the organic self-determination resulting from the births of community, remarking "despite policies aimed at fragmenting family bonds and separating people from their traditional territories. Indigenous communities have made even their most isolated and marginal spaces a home place imbued with spiritual significance and indigenous identity" (2012, p.128). Distinguishing these complex processes and visions enables acknowledgement and celebration of dynamic Indigenous communities, their place-making processes, and persistent relational responsibilities.

Being as relationships fundamentally inform relational self-determination, an important task is the identification of relationships in need of transformation. Not all relationships that Indigenous women and communities are currently entangled in are balanced, positive, consensual, or even functional. Positioning self-determination as a strategy of empowerment, lateral love (as opposed to violence), and international community building, restructuring underlying relations as proposed by Kuokkanen offers valuable alternatives. In her book *Restructuring Relations: Indigenous Self-Determination, Governance, and Gender* (2019), Kuokkanen proposes:

> As a foundational value, I suggest that Indigenous self-determination seeks to restructure all relations of domination premised on inequality and injustice. These relations include relations of settler colonialism, neoliberal capitalism, paternalism, misogyny, sexism, homophobia, and gender violence. Many of us are familiar with the principle and practice of self-determination as a means of restructuring the fundamental structural relation of settler colonialism as violent dispossession that extends to Indigenous lands and (women's) bodies. (p.2)

She elaborates on this restructuring process, arguing:

> Restructuring relations implies a process of understanding and transforming the interlocking, multilayered relations of violence and inequality. It involves the transformation of a complex array of state and nonstate practices, structures of relations, ideas, and beliefs that undermine our core values. (p.11)

Meaningful, inclusive, and accountable goals for self-determination become attainable through relations grounded in day-to-day, resurgent community-building processes. In contrast to self-determination envisioned by male-dominated configurations, relational self-determination is not dictated by the patriarchal, heteronormative logics of colonialism and Eurocentrism. It is primarily concerned with sustaining responsibilities and relationships to ensure the wellbeing of Indigenous communities without minimizing the specific needs and concerns of Indigenous women.

4.2 Urban Indigeneity and Self-Determination in Russia

Official discourse and racial stereotypes in the Russian Federation characterize indigeneity as inextricably linked to intact rural landscapes and 'traditional' ways of life (Murashko & Rohr, 2019). This has not stopped the migration of Indigenous peoples to cities, however; in Siberia a high rate of Indigenous urbanization persists (Sablin & Savelyeva, 2011; Balzer, 2016). Characterizations of Indigenous people living in cities as culturally disconnected, impoverished, and isolated dominate established narratives of urban indigeneity (Kulikova, 2015). These narratives serve to naturalize notions of Indigenous peoples' incompatibility with cities. While *KMNS* undeniably face challenges in urban landscapes, focussing exclusively on crisis and tragedy narratives neglects meaningful engagement with vibrant and ambitious urban individuals and communities. Simpson (2017) connects Indigenous mobility to agency, challenging static and archaic settler colonial imaginations of indigeneity and its presence in cities as intentional, valuable, and dynamic. Her illustration of "mobility imbued with agency as resurgence" (p.197) rejects colonial narratives dictating spatially-conditioned "traditionality" in favour of reimagining transformative relationships and practices based on Indigenous worldviews and futures. I argue that urban Indigenous communities weave together rural, urban, and liminal spatialities to challenge political discourses impeding Indigenous futures and foster inclusive, celebratory, and generative indigeneity. This argument aims to honour urban Indigenous communities' agency in Russian political landscapes that seek to reduce indigeneity to static geographical, cultural, and political existences.

Criteria set forth in Russian federal laws imagines Indigenous peoples and cultures as fundamentally incompatible with cities and urban landscapes (Russian Federation Federal Law

No.104, 20 July 2000). This is not exclusive to Russia, of course, as conceptualizations of indigeneity worldwide have been restricted to non-urban environments concurrent with shifting political and cultural agendas. Geographers Evelyn Peters and Chris Anderson explain the pressures these narratives place on urban Indigenous communities:

> The historic development of discourses that defined Indigenous peoples and their cultures as incongruous with modern urban life means that urban areas exert particular influences on struggles over the meaning of Indigenous identities. The association of "authentic" Indigenous identities with non-urban locations positions urban Indigenous cultures and lifeways as inauthentic and less legitimate. (2013, p.1)

Despite these tensions, Indigenous peoples migrating to cities such as Yakutsk are finding each other and redefining 'authenticity' by rooting themselves at the intersections of traditional and newfound relationalities, spatialities, and responsibilities. Considering the substantial and shifting characteristics of both Indigenous communities and self-determination, the dynamic processes of self-determination for urban Indigenous communities require nuanced and compassionate analysis to appreciate the multifaceted gendered dynamics unfolding.

4.2.1 Kinships and Urban Indigeneity

Kinship relations are tenacious systems of governance that defy colonial norms and definitions, championing Indigenous navigations of contemporary relationships and spatialities. Cherokee writer Daniel Heath Justice describes the integrity of these relations woven into Indigenous communities:

> We exist today as Indigenous nations, as peoples, and the foundation of any continuity as such is our relationships to one another—in other words, our kinship with other humans and the rest of creation. Such kinship isn't a static thing; it's dynamic, ever in motion. It requires attentiveness; kinship is best thought of as a verb rather than a noun, because kinship, in most Indigenous contexts, is something that's done more than something that simply is. (2016, p.352)

The robust political and cultural assemblages embodied by kinships sustain nearby and distant connections Indigenous people have to their distinct and collective relations and responsibilities. For urban *KMNS* women specifically, the nature of their relationality and responsibilities is the foundation of urban communities as they support the adaptation of younger *KMNS* throughout the city.

Kinships (in their many manifestations) have been integral to the endurance of indigeneity in Russia (Anderson, 2000; Ventsel, 2005). Kinship is recognized as an important aspect of traditional cultural and economic practices for *KMNS* (Slezkine, 1994; Bloch, 2004). Under the Soviet Union, these networks were economically, politically, and culturally targeted for fragmentation. Despite this, they persisted and evolved. Ethnographer Aimar Ventsel describes the enlargement of the 'geography of kinship' facilitated by *KMNS* mobility between urban and rural spaces in Sakha Republic (Yakutia) (2005, p.154). Ventsel argues that these kinship networks were strategic evolutions of traditional family structures and modes of Indigenous governance.

The value of urban indigeneity, regardless of roots in traditional practices, remains unacknowledged by all levels of Russian government. *KMNS* arriving to Yakutsk are allocated no resources and experience intense pressures to assimilate into Sakha culture. These realities undermine anticipations of rights discourses or state support advancing visions of urban Indigenous self-determination. Rather, persistent kinships sustain urban Indigenous resilience in Yakutsk. Two clear and interconnected forms of kinship occur in Yakutsk: blood kin and what I term 'woven' kinship. Woven kinships are cultivated between *KMNS* women, whether from the same nation or different, that grow from compassionate understandings and a desire to address challenges *KMNS* face in the city. I witnessed several stories of woven kinship from

women who had developed local dance ensembles and their unfolding alongside blood kinships. These formations work to expand and nourish relations between *KMNS* in Yakutsk, ultimately naturalizing a sense of indigenous belonging in the city regardless of policy or external pressures. The subversive nature of these kinships nourishes the reciprocal proliferation of urban indigeneity as kin with different levels of experience, knowledge, and stability interact and support each other.

Self-determining Indigenous kinships in Yakutsk led by women prioritize the health and well-being of Indigenous peoples navigating urban landscapes. The communities are not defined by narratives of victimhood or displacement – they embrace renewable and transformative authenticity, embodied by reciprocal dialogues between kin. Urban Indigenous community building defies colonial structures that would limit, curb, and contain it within systems that are palatable and subjugated by settler-colonial sensibilities and interpretations.

4.2.2 Kinships Navigating Tensions between State and Indigenous Agendas

I witnessed three significant events in Yakutsk illuminating the transformation of public spaces into places for unapologetic expressions and celebrations of the Indigenous presence in the city, facilitated by urban Indigenous peoples and dance ensembles. The significance of these events – an Indigenous youth gathering, the celebration of World Indigenous Peoples Day and the inauguration of Sakha Republic's new head of state – is highlighted by the presence of subtle colonial tensions in dialogue with *KMNS* community invigoration.

Suglan – 6 August 2018

Suglan, the Evenki word for meeting, took place in early August 2018 on the outskirts of the city. As noted in Chapter 3, it was an opportunity for *KMNS* youth from around Sakha

Republic (Yakutia) to travel to Yakutsk and connect with other students, advocates, and community members. I had opportunities to meet many young women at this event who would

Figure 4.1 Participants and delegates at Suglan opening ceremonies - 6 August 2018 (photo credit: Tsatia Adzich)

later share their stories with me. Their stories described Suglan as an exciting and unique opportunity to meet other young *KMNS* who spoke their languages, knew about their culture, and were navigating the city (Figure 4.1). They spoke eagerly about feeling free to proudly speak their languages and were in awe of being in a space with so many young language speakers. as well as to share their songs and dances.

However, this event was not without its complexities. While Suglan generated a self-determining landscape for Indigenous art, dance, and celebration, it received financial support from the political campaign for Aisen Nikolaev, a candidate in the 2018 election for Republic Head. During the event, I witnessed youth being instructed on proper greetings, waving, and songs in anticipation of Nikolaev's arrival the following day by his campaign team to be included in a video. Participation in meticulously choreographed and staged endorsements of

Nikolaev by youth were mandatory. The duality of this event – simultaneously generating vibrant urban community connections through innovative kinships in tandem with the commodification of Indigenous youth as symbols of political currency – is nuanced.

Experiences and reflections on Suglan should not be defined by encroaching political or government agendas as the value of such events are more intricate than this oversimplification. Consenting to participate in Nikolaev's political agenda in exchange for financial support for the weekend is indicative of the agency exercised by the organizing committee as well as the youth. Considering the scale of the election activity in Yakutia during August 2018, and the widespread support for Aisen Nikolaev, consensual participation in the event and his campaign was not controversial. The resulting urban Indigenous community amplification and collaboration in Yakutsk is an enduring benefit of Suglan and the connections made between 50 *KMNS* youth and community members from around Sakha Republic (Yakutia). The incorporation and celebration of *KMNS* languages, dances, songs, and traditions throughout the event, as well as in the relationships between youth that came from Suglan normalize and empower indigeneity in Yakutsk without tokenizing it. I witnessed this vestige in September when I met with an Eveny girl who shared how her lasting connections to friends and mentors from the experience were supporting her adaptation to Yakutsk.

World Indigenous Peoples Day – 9 August 2018

The second event that briefly transformed the social, cultural, and political landscapes in Yakutsk to celebrate Indigenous communities and peoples was World Indigenous Peoples Day on 9 August 2018 in Ordzhonikidze Square, a major square in the center of the city. This event inundated the city with the presence and energies from innovative expressions of urban indigeneity and kinship, including *KMNS* dance ensembles. Yakutsk was transformed by all

aspects of the event from the opening parade that disrupted regular traffic to the extensive infrastructure assembled to showcase dancers and other performers to the closing of nearby businesses so employees could participate. A large fire was built in the center of the square so community members arriving could "feed the fire", a *KMNS* tradition acknowledging and thanking ancestors. The celebratory atmosphere was invigorated by the presence of community members from across Sakha Republic (Yakutia), their tangible pride, languages, and uninhibited expressions of indigeneity (Figure 4.2).

Figure 4.2: Women dancing in front of the main stage of World Indigenous Peoples Day - 9 August 2018 (photo credit: Tsatia Adzich)

Figure 4.3: Evenki family poses with their reindeer and guests in Ordzhonikidze Square for World Indigenous Peoples Day - 9 August 2018 (photo credit: Tsatia Adzich)

KMNS dance ensembles are an expression of indigeneity in the city that has been sanctioned by the state as non-threatening and cooperative, consequently endorsing their presence at major state-sponsored events without issue (Figure 4.3). While the transformation of Ordzhonikidze Square into a space immersed with indigeneity was a monumental achievement and experience for *KMNS* communities in Yakutsk, it did not undermine state power to define indigeneity as it fits a colonial agenda. In some ways, it consolidates state power to approve and regulate when and where sizeable moments of *KMNS* visibility are permitted and how they are produced. Deconstructing veiled impacts of events that may, on the surface, appear simply as moments of empowerment is important for remaining critically perceptive of ever-present and deceptive colonial agendas. There remains immense value in 9 August, despite the layers of complexity: World Indigenous Peoples Day was regularly referred to by women as an event

during which they felt overwhelming pride in their Eveny and Evenki identities in Yakutsk. Holding these conflicting aspects of the event in tension and dialogue with each other is fundamental to establishing in-depth and nuanced understandings and relationships to urban indigeneity as it is nourished in public spaces.

Inauguration of Aisen Nikolaev – 27 September 2018

The third event I witnessed was the inauguration of Aisen Nikolaev, the newly elected head of Sakha Republic (Yakutia) on 27 September 2018, on the steps of the Russian Theatre. Several women invited me to attend the opening ceremony of the inauguration, each of whom were members or leaders of dance ensembles that would represent their nations during the proceedings.

Figure 4.4: Members of KMNS dance ensembles line the entrance to the Russian Ballet Theatre to welcome incoming Republic Head Aisen Nikolaev 27 September 2018 (photo credit: Tsatia Adzich)

My first impression of the event and its incorporation of *KMNS* individuals and dance ensembles was the opposite of my initial perception of the other events: the disrespectful treatment and tokenization of *KMNS* by government representatives was an uncomfortable and overwhelming reality. As politicians arrived at the venue, they were greeted by vibrant and enthusiastic arrangements of women and *KMNS* representatives along the entrance path (Figure 4.4) – but many barely acknowledged this, entering the square on their cellphones and disappearing into the theatre without a backwards glance. The gender dynamics involved in this power imbalance are noteworthy, as nearly all bureaucrats were men and most ensemble participants were women. These men embodied the paternalistic nature of the Russian state as they walked past Indigenous women without engaging with them or even acknowledging their presence. Once all the delegates had arrived and entered the theater, the massive doors closed and those welcoming the delegates were seemingly forgotten. Interactions between the politicians and *KMNS* communities, severed at the entrance to the theatre, appeared irrelevant to the formal political proceedings of the day.

While this bleak reality was easily observed and critiqued, recognizing the subversive appropriation of this space by urban *KMNS* communities is important for appreciating the entanglement of Indigenous agendas alongside colonial ones. Beyond the tokenism and disregard for people by officials, the atmosphere of the event was transformed by the presence and energy of dance ensembles as urban kinship networks supporting each other and reconnecting. The transformation of public spaces in Russian cities by creative tactics such as these is discussed by Frohlich and Jacobsson (2019), who describe the ingenuity and resilience of communities creating spaces for themselves. They write,

> Everyday tactics take advantage of opportunities offered and make creative use of the cracks that particular conjunctures open in the surveillance of the property

> owners or regulators, creating surprise. Thus, while the spatial practices of the power structures shape the conditions of social life in the city, the inhabitants develop their own spatial tactics in the cracks, thus reappropriating public space for their own needs or wishes. (2019, p.4)

The square in front of the theatre, inconsequential to the formal affairs of the inauguration, was animated with interactions, governance, and exchanges among groups. Attentiveness to community relationships, new and established, addressed the possibility that individuals, performances, and organizations would be simplistically reduced to tokens and reclaimed the purpose of the event. Women that had been dismissed during the entrance of the bureaucrats were the center of this activity, and well-respected throughout their networks and families. Kinship networks spanning Yakutsk and connecting rural kin through dance ensembles capitalized on this opportunity to reconnect and invigorate their sense of community on their own terms as they greeted Nikolaev.

Like Suglan and World Indigenous Peoples Day, the significance of this event was not defined by external political agendas bringing *KMNS* together. Indigenous women, dance ensembles, and kinship networks exercise their agency in landscapes saturated with politics and tensions to celebrate their relations, their motivations, and their futures without permitting colonial perceptions to reduce their presence. The recharacterization of bureaucratic proceedings into an opportunity for kin and dance ensembles from across Sakha Republic (Yakutia) to collaborate and organize was an extraordinary act of self-determination to witness. *KMNS* women attending this event refused impersonal demands for Indigenous performativity by strategically condensing the distance between rural and urban kinships through the participation of *KMNS* dance ensembles, and curating the event strategically to further their own political and cultural agendas of nourishing urban kin.

4.3 Dance Ensembles and Relational Self-Determination in Yakutsk

Kinship networks continue to insurgently nourish indigeneity in the face of modern fragmentation by deploying new geographical constellations, including in urban spaces. Urban indigeneity nests itself in the liminal space connecting traditional relationships and practices of Eveny and Evenki communities while simultaneously honouring contemporary spatialities and community building strategies. An important example of intricate and nuanced urban relationality in Yakutsk was the compassionate leadership demonstrated by Indigenous women forming and guiding dance ensembles.

Figure 4.5: Evenki dance ensemble in Lenin Square, 21 May 2019 celebrating creation of new federally protected northern regions (photo credit: Tsatia Adzich)

Dance ensembles make important contributions to the establishment, cultivation, and perpetuation of kinships that challenge narratives of traditionality exclusively associated with

rurality or nomadism. They blur the binary between traditional and modern, as they are rooted in traditional kin relations but are created in the city to address uniquely urban challenges. They are regularly present at events throughout the city as representative of traditional *KMNS* cultures, however token this may feel.

However, the political agenda of the Russian state to disappear Indigenous peoples disqualifies urban kinships from being counted as 'traditional enough' to warrant protection from ever-encroaching threats, including Yakutization. Neglecting the significance of Indigenous governance structures and kinship networks based on urban spatialities is an insidious tactic by the Russian state to further discredit the existence or value of urban indigeneity. I argue that the transformative significance of *KMNS* dance ensembles as community governance structures led by women to address the needs of newly arrived *KMNS* women in the city of Yakutsk are strong assertions of relation self-determination. This follows Kuokkanen's argument that relational self-determination "is about relations. For Indigenous peoples, self-determination is about a vision and struggle for restructuring relations of domination for a more just present and future for their societies and people" (2019, p.22). Dance ensembles as relation self-determination then weaken assurances that systematically reducing the population eligible for benefits, recognition, and protections will dissolve Indigenous communities by emboldening *KMNS* mobility to cities without forfeiting their community connections or ability to proudly express their identity.

While 'self-determination' remains a controversial and politically volatile term in Russia, the cultivation of accountabilities throughout relationships and communities are powerful examples of what grounded individual and collective self-determination means. Dance ensembles were repeatedly invoked as valuable examples of community, family, and

support systems in the city of Yakutsk. Over two-thirds of women mentioned their involvement with or relation to dance ensembles and arising connections throughout and beyond local kinship networks in their stories. These reoccurring affiliations reinforce the vital relationality involved in the fostering and growth of urban Indigenous communities as self-determining political and cultural entities.

In this section, I argue that dance ensembles fulfil three interrelated accomplishments: first, they are sustainable and necessary structures assisting *KMNS* women navigate Yakutsk. They help newly arrived women secure safe and affordable housing, become familiar with the city, and adapt to city life while honouring uniquely *KMNS* relationalities. Second, dance ensembles transform public places and events into safe(r) spaces for *KMNS* languages, identities, and cultures to be shared and celebrated in innovative and relatable ways. Spaces appropriated by kinship networks to subversively celebrate urban indigeneity interact with other political or cultural agendas present, but they are not beholden to state criteria of 'traditionality' for legitimacy. Finally, dance ensembles motivate *KMNS* individuals to resist 'Yakutization', as explored in Chapter 3. By publicly and privately celebrating *KMNS* languages, community connections, accountability to family responsibilities, and (dynamic) traditions, dance ensembles are entangled in important movements of resistance, persistence, and self-determination.

4.3.1 Dance Ensembles as Support Systems for *KMNS* Women Navigating Yakutsk

Through stories and relationships, I witnessed the unfolding of subtle, intimate, and highly contextual self-determination by *KMNS* women involved with dance ensembles in Yakutsk. In this section, stories speak to the support and care facilitated by kinship networks

in the form of dance ensembles. The best description of what dance ensembles provide for young *KMNS* women arriving to the city was offered by an Evenki woman who led several different groups:

> *All members of our ensembles are Indigenous people and people who want to study our culture… Most of the youth come from northern villages. Being in these ensembles, they get to socialize and adapt to city life while at the same time preserving their own culture…. In our groups, I take everyone who wishes to participate. We do so much extra work, including helping youth find their accommodations and receive their northern scholarships so they don't experience problems. We also help them solve any problems that arise in school. When I was part of Kolun[10], most of us had come from the villages, and we would all work together to solve each other's problems. The experiences I had during those times dancing with Kolun, I bring to these ensembles now.* (personal communication, 20 August 2018)

An Eveny woman who also managed a dance ensemble attributed her determination to provide supports for other *KMNS* women through dance ensembles to familial responsibilities:

> *I'm the eldest sibling out of five in my family; since my childhood, my parents have always encouraged me to take responsibility for my younger siblings. That sense of responsibility still defines me and has helped me throughout life. I feel responsible not only for myself but for others too, which is probably why I was so determined to create this ensemble.*
>
> *When I was first adapting to life in the city, I was not able to dance or sing. I wanted to though. I tried to get accepted into the state ensemble, but I wasn't selected. They had strict requirements. At that time, I wondered why there were no ensembles that would accept anyone who was willing, regardless of their skills or training. I thought it was important for this type of ensemble to exist – and to be dedicated to the revival of folklore, songs, and art in the community. During my early years at NEFU, I was always thinking about it. And then last year we finally made an ensemble. Right now, in our ensemble there are only Eveny and Evenki participating, but it is open to anyone who wants to join and learn Eveny dances and songs. You do not need to have special training or any skills already – I remember experiencing that and do not want to limit who can join our ensemble now.* (personal communication, 20 September 2018)

[10] A professional dance ensemble that only accepts dancers with formal choreography training and substantial previous experience.

The natural translation of familial responsibilities to urban kin exemplifies the development of 'woven' kinships in Yakutsk, as women observe gaps in opportunities and resources for other women and feel responsibility for addressing them. The intersections of family and urban kin in dance ensembles was fondly noted by another young Evenki woman:

> *In our dance ensemble, we have all different nations together – Uzbek, Evenki, Sakha, and even Russians. The head of my dance troupe is a really good leader. I have been part of this dance troupe since the fifth grade. In our dancing troupe, we are like a family. We are all like brothers and sisters*. (personal communication, 17 August 2018)

Another young Eveny woman who had previously belonged to a dance ensemble also fondly reflected on supports dance ensembles provide to *KMNS* as they adapt to the city. She felt dance ensembles were useful structures youth could call on in Yakutsk to find their footing and adjust to life away from their families:

> *[W]ith dance ensembles, there are opportunities to take part in many events, make new friends, and meet other contestants. Also, recently Aymyldaan*[11] *travelled to Magadan, and they were there for three days. I feel all these experiences will help.* (personal communication, 22 September 2018)

4.4 The Disruption of 'Yakutization' by *KMNS* Kinships

Chapter 3 highlighted the multifaceted ways that 'Yakutization' influences *KMNS* communities, cultures, and futures. However, the resilient presence of *KMNS* cultures and identities in Yakutsk despite Yakutization shine through the stories this project worked alongside. I argue that *KMNS* refusals to 'yakutize' are partly invigorated by the cultivation of urban *KMNS* kinships based in blood and woven relations to remind others of the persistence of Indigenous culture and community.

[11] Aymyldaan – the dance ensemble the woman had previously belonged to.

Relational systems of support are important strategies for resisting Yakutization because they incorporate both modern understandings of cultural dynamics and traditional social practices. The depth of kin connections I witnessed appear distinct to *KMNS*, partly due to the profound nourishment provided by *KMNS* dance ensembles and values. Sakha kinships weaving together urban and rural relations explored by Sakha anthropologist Tatiana Argounova-Low differ immensely from the familial intimacy articulated in stories about kinship I witnessed. For the Sakha, urbanization rearranged their kinship networks to insulate the urban community from their rural kin and fosters reluctance to associate with those unaccustomed to urban norms and expectations (Argounova-Low, 2007). Despite splintered kinships, their responsibilities continue to be (resentfully) upheld by urban Sakha. Stories shared by *KMNS* women diverge sharply from Sakha attitudes, apparent in the following reflection from a Yakutsk-born Evenki woman on supporting family adapt to the city:

> Tsatia: Do you think that Yakutsk is a city people from villages are able to adapt to quickly?
>
> *From having helped my relatives, it seems to be difficult here. But we always take them where they need to go.*
>
> T: Have you helped many of your relatives from villages adapt to life here?
>
> *Yes. Mostly our younger relatives. Before they come here to study, they live with us, and then also while they are studying they stay at our place.*
>
> T: For how long you do you usually help them?
>
> *For several years, usually. But in the summers, they go home. One of my cousins is a sportsman. He really excelled in 2012 at the Children of Asia competition, and in other championships. Now he's graduated from the faculty of physical education and works as a trainer in a private organization. We had good relationship. He's very independent. He lived with us for a couple years before he was accepted into the dorm. This story is special for my family because we are just a regular family. The fact that he got a higher education and found a good job means a lot to me.* (personal communication, 20 July 2018)

This woman's attitude towards hosting her cousin for two years staunchly differs from Sakha attitudes documented by Argounova-Low (2007, p.54). On the other hand, the connections between Sakha researcher Argounova-Low and her Sakha informants compared to my position as a white-presenting Cree-Metis woman speaking to Eveny and Evenki women should be noted as a possible explanation for the vast differences between narratives. Conflicting *KMNS* and Sakha mentalities towards kinship responsibilities and obligations associated with these relationships were noted by several of the women I spoke with in Yakutsk, however.

> *Sakha mindsets and mentalities are very different here. When I first arrived in the city, I noticed this difference immediately. Sakha are very pragmatic. They are kind, but pragmatic. They look at the material aspects of things, of relationships, rather than the spiritual. Aboriginal people of the North are ready to give you their very last possession. They are kind in very different ways.* (personal communication, 20 September 2018)

> *If you compare aboriginal women from northern territories and Sakha women from central Yakutia, their mentalities are much different. Northern people, we are more open and emotional. But Sakha women, they are closed off and very shy.* (personal communication, 20 August 2018)

As the rate of *KMNS* women arriving in Yakutsk increases, it could be argued that *KMNS* kinship networks are empathetically restructuring themselves to supportively and sincerely receive newcomers. As opposed to the 'Yakutization' of *KMNS* kinships, their cultural and social relationality effectively resists their absorption into a more individualistic Sakha approach to kinships.

An accomplished Eveny academic and mother shared her strategy for maintaining her urban indigeneity through the connections she maintains with her siblings in the village.

> *I have a very close relationship with my siblings. My brothers are still in the villages, so I often send them goods, such as school supplies from the city. In return, they send me fresh meat, fish, and berries from the village. This is how we maintain our relationships, and we are all very close. Without these relationships, I would not make it*. (personal communication, 1 September 2018)

She went on to describe how reciprocal kinship relations inspire her career, and how her connections to reindeer-herding kin guides her professional interests and undertakings:

> *Aboriginal people maintain their traditions in many ways – my…part of a dance ensemble, my…nomadic reindeer herders, and I am a… My academic work is in service to my community, my family, and especially my... I recently helped propose legislation that would protect nomadic families which passed last year. It is all to support my people.* (personal communication, 1 September 2018)[12]

Modern Indigenous relationalities and strategies of cultural persistence in Yakutsk represent crucial interventions made by kinship networks. The evolution of kinship networks from their roots in "traditional" nomadic practices to contemporary urban support networks defy dominant political and social configurations attempts to invalidate and diminish their significance.

4.5 Concluding Thoughts: The Relationality and Autonomy of Urban *KMNS* Self-Determination

The analysis of stories and observations throughout this chapter has primarily taken into consideration individual stories of relationships, independence, and resilience as contributions to a vibrant project of collective self-determination. One of the most important assertions of relational self-determination that persisted throughout the stories were the responsibilities taken up by dance ensembles, and the communities consequently generated. I witnessed a wealth of stories that exemplified the importance of individual self-determination to the meaningful construction of strong foundations for collective self-determination. This is a strong foundation to move forward with an analysis of urban Indigenous self-determination from, considering Kuokkanen's (2019) argument that

[12] Personal details have been redacted from this quote to protect the confidentiality of this woman and her family

> …without individual self-determination, meaningful and viable collective self-determination of Indigenous peoples is not possible. Val Napoleon argues that the Indigenous political discourse regarding self-determination would be more useful to communities if it incorporated an understanding of the individual as relational, autonomous, and self-determining. That is, a developed perspective of individual self-determination is necessary to move collective self-determination beyond rhetoric to a meaningful and practical project that engages Indigenous peoples and is deliberately inclusive of Indigenous women… (p.131)

An Eveny woman who had created a dance ensemble to ensure that any *KMNS* person (man or woman) looking to build relationships in the urban community shared with me how proud she was of the ensemble she oversaw:

> *I'm proud that everyone who is part of our ensemble is united and always supportive of each other. Relationships between people should always be the priority I think. Always. It's very important that everyone in the ensemble supports each other and is friends.* (personal communication, 20 September 2018)

During my time in Yakutsk I met two women who had both created and now managed dance ensembles. These women spoke about their inspiration to undertake such an initiative coming from their intentions to cultivate supportive and generative communities through ensembles. Their previous memberships in dance ensembles and the community they brought together motivated these women to carry it forward for younger *KMNS*. The Evenki woman shared how creating a dance ensemble entirely of her family members, eventually became a full-time job:

> *I created this group five years ago, so this year we are celebrating its fifth anniversary! It all started five years ago because of my grandfather, on his 95th birthday. This year he will be 100, and it is amazing that he is still alive. On his 95th birthday, all my sisters, aunts, nieces, we all wanted to dance an Evenki dance for him. The people who were guests at his celebration thought that we were professional dancers, part of an organized ensemble. It inspired me to create a dance group, because at that time there was only the Kolun ensemble, and it was more professional than for fun and being together as family. After this first performance for my grandfather, my family agreed to open it up and take all people who wanted to dance with us.* (personal communication, 20 August 2018)

What began as a gift to her grandfather evolved to become an important pillar in the Indigenous community, bringing together numerous women of all ages and giving them a place to belong and feel proud of their identities.

The cultural importance of dance ensembles to developing urban Indigenous communities, as well as their maintenance of kinship relations that transcend boundaries between urban and rural spaces, were made clear throughout the stories shared by *KMNS* women in Yakutsk. Dance ensembles are vehicles for asserting self-determination of urban indigeneity, in all its complexities and nuances. Despite the avoidance of the specific term self-determination, the relevance of the concept as a relational assertion of community, governance, and futurity is clear. Individual distancing from identifying acts or events as assertions of self-determination is informed by the geopolitical circumstances of Russia, and the Russian Far East in particular. Russian legal and political proceedings that meaningfully consider Indigenous empowerment, rights, and relationships are complex, and consequences for invocation of inflammatory discourse are swift and informal. The energy and the pride in the expansion of the urban Indigenous community in Yakutsk was palpable during observations and stories, ultimately informing this analysis of the role dance ensembles and kinship networks play in that evolution.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

5.1 Summary of Findings

Findings I had anticipated during the thesis proposal stage of this project substantially differed from what stories shared taught me. Yakutization became a key theme in this research only after women with who I spoke revealed the intense pressures from Sakha society in Yakutsk. As a witness, I remain responsible to ensure Yakutization is visible in my recounting of stories. While Yakutization primarily unfolds linguistically, it also arose in day-to-day interactions, shaming and intimidating women into cautiously identifying themselves as *KMNS* depending on their sense of cultural safety and acceptance – or evading this identity entirely. This did not prevent women from building and sustaining urban communities, however; the strategies deployed to create caring, intentional urban Indigenous networks and relations simultaneously generated community and Indigenous belonging while resisting enabling navigation and resistance to Yakutization. Dance ensembles are an effective method of generative resistance, as they reaffirm Indigenous women's identities and sense of belonging in urban spaces as refusals of restrictive criteria set forth by the Russian state regarding where indigeneity belongs. These ensembles navigate obligatory interactions with structures of colonialism, from financially necessary exchanges to political endorsements, resulting in the redefinition of issues addressed and the strategies called upon. Simpson (2017) explores the critical interventions this type of organizing makes into Indigenous communities and the politics of recognition we find ourselves enmeshed in. She argues, "[b]uilding movements that reject the politics of recognition and center generative refusal inherently creates Indigenous bodies more connected to each other and the land, and that act out, through relationality, Indigenous thought" (2017, p.178). The agency exercised by Indigenous women through their

personal relationships and their participation in dance ensembles to build strong urban communities exemplifies the relational Indigenous self-determination unfolding in Yakutsk.

Reflecting on my thesis findings and conclusions, I want to offer an observation from my return trip to Yakutsk in May 2019. The purpose of my return trip was to share my findings in different community spaces, acknowledging ongoing accountabilities to the urban Indigenous community. To my surprise, my exploration of Yakutization presented to the Institute for Humanities Research and Problems of Indigenous Northern Peoples elicited emotional and defensive responses from Sakha and Russian academics. Despite recent expert assessments (including Balzer 2016) that Yakutization is an *ongoing* threat to Indigenous communities and well-being, the audience vehemently argued that findings regarding Yakutization in Yakutsk were incorrect and unsubstantiated. Adamant rebuttals were made, and conclusions were drawn that flaws in my methods must have produced my false findings. Recalling how the women with whom I spoke recounted their experiences feeling pressured to linguistically and culturally assimilate into the Sakha body politic, I stand by the integrity of the stories I witnessed and the conclusions they advanced. Further investigations could be conducted into differing degrees of Yakutization on *KMNS* women based on educational backgrounds, geographical origins, and economic status, as well as on Sakha denials of Yakutization as an ongoing phenomenon.

This response from Sakha researchers necessitates critical reflexivity on my position as an 'outsider' asking questions, despite sharing experiences and understandings of urban indigeneity. During my research I have navigated occupying both an insider and an outsider relationship to the issues addressed by my research, but taking into consideration how other academics perceive the fluidity of positionalities and approaches to this research illuminates

other aspects of this investigation. Local Sakha researchers may have reacted defensively because they are uncomfortable with any (unintentional) personal implications my findings suggest to processes of Yakutization but contemplating the extent to which these scholars have had access to and participated in vulnerable discussions about Yakutization with urban *KMNS* as I did reveals nuanced dynamics to these reactions. As a foreign researcher, I presented women I met with an opportunity to anonymously share their experiences as an urban Indigenous woman in Yakutsk that may have been previously unavailable to them, eliciting findings likely inaccessible to local researchers. Comparable to this situation are dynamics accounted for in research with women who experience abuse or violence in rural, isolated communities who do not disclose their situations to their friends, family, and officials for fear of not being believed, or feeling alienated from their community for speaking out about an issue (Krishnan, Hilbert, & VanLeeuwen, 2001). By guaranteeing confidentiality of identities and stories, my research offered Indigenous women an opportunity to discuss their experiences and reflect on their identities in ways they had not previously.

Simultaneously, of course, the reverse may also be true: as a foreign researcher, local women wanted to represent their country and experiences in the most positive light possible. In her work with the lived experiences of Muslim women, Zempi (2016) analyses the differing benefits to approaching research from both an 'insider' and an 'outsider' perspective as being an insider can enrich findings overall while being an outsider can encourage community members to engage differently with the research questions. My positionality as a foreign female student visiting Yakutsk asking Indigenous women questions about their lives in the city with a firm departure date back to Turtle Island created an atmosphere for women to respond to my questions anonymously that reflected honest aspects of their experiences

without putting them at risk of exposure, or of regularly interacting with me after sharing their story. This dynamic of our interactions and relations shifted my positionality as an Indigenous woman engaging with other Indigenous women to that of a temporary visitor in the city with whom ongoing encounters would not be expected. I reflected on this shifting power dynamic only upon returning to Yakutsk and presenting my research to local Russian and Sakha scholars. Prior to this, I remained focussed on the stories shared with me and had left this aspect of my shifting positionality unexplored. This progression reflects a shared experience amongst feminist scholars engaged in qualitative research of unintentional, yet highly important and informative, analysis and critiques of approaches and mindfulness to how power dynamics unfold relationally (Kohl & McCutcheon, 2015).

Other key findings defining the narratives threaded throughout this thesis are the supportive and evolving strategies used by *KMNS* women for adapting to Yakutsk as exemplified by different expressions of kinship. My familiarity with kinships as accessible intellectual traditions of Indigenous women throughout and beyond Turtle Island stimulated early theorization of shared global kinship experiences between Indigenous communities. My original proposal expected to observe and interact with kinship as an important theme for my analysis of stories in Yakutsk. Particularly, I found that kinships encompassed not only familial and blood relations but were also important connections between women whose only connections were being *KMNS* and living in Yakutsk. I termed these 'woven' kinships to connote the strength coming from the integration of multiple separate elements into a single unified formation.

5.1.1 Feminism in Russia

Working from a feminist theoretical framework presented challenges, as 'feminism' has a complicated history in Post-Soviet Russia. From the 1990s until the 2000s, dissemination of feminist ideas occurred through feminist organizations primarily funded by western organizations until funding was no longer available (Tartakovskaya, 2010 in Salmenniemi & Adamson, 2015). Now, feminism is "understood as an invariably alien, western-imported ideology incompatible with Russian culture" (Salmenniemi & Adamnson, 2015, p.92). When explaining my research to colleagues, friends, and women considering sharing their stories, I used extremely careful language. Feminism remained absent from any stories or other exchanges between myself and women with whom I worked. This prevented alienation or discomfort for women that wanted to learn more about my research, build a relationship, or share their stories. Learning about perceptions of feminism as an indulgent and incompatible Western theoretical import reminded me of the importance of being intentional about building relationships and trust with the women with whom I spoke, on their terms.

My interpreter Sardaana (who openly identified as feminist) and I discussed feminism and hostility in Russia to the concept. She shared how she had learned about feminism as a young person from Western pop-culture and literature, which shaped her relationship to feminism as an academic endeavour as well as a social phenomenon. Sardaana's English fluency made Western media accessible to her while it remains unattainable to many citizens of Yakutsk, and of Russia.

5.1.2 Storying Urban Indigenous Geographies

The stories shared by Indigenous women throughout this thesis contribute to reconceptualizing the urban geography of Yakutsk from Indigenous women's perspectives. Privileging the stories and experiences of Indigenous women to reimagine the city as an Indigenous place represents an anti-colonial project destabilizing dominant narratives of urban spatialities as incompatible with Indigenous cultures, traditions, and lives. The richness of urban indigeneity and stories that characterize it weave together the findings and ideas of this thesis to offer a glimpse into the realities of contemporary Indigenous realities in Sakha Republic (Yakutia). Indigenous women's stories inform the foundations, the processes, and the conclusions offered in this thesis. The generous and compassionate investments of young Indigenous women in storying relationships for the purposes of this project suggests important opportunities for future explorations and celebrations of urban indigeneity around the world. Indigenous peoples and cultures have always had vigorous international relations, far before colonization. Urban Indigenous communities are ready to engage in collaborative projects across colonial borders to develop meaningful dialogues around their experiences, and I am excited for our relationships as urban Indigenous peoples around the world to blossom.

Storying indigeneity reflects the dynamic characteristics inherent to globally-diverse expressions of Indigenous responsibilities, community, governance, and culture to show both the similarities and differences. Stories shared by Indigenous women are each distinct and valuable in their own ways, and there are no stories more valuable or valid than another. Some stories were deeply personal and filled with vulnerability, others were filled with laughter and joy, and each of those feelings have uniquely informed what this thesis offers. The overarching

narrative this project developed is the brilliance, resilience, and substance of urban indigeneity that defies even the most daunting encroachments onto identity and relations.

5.2 Reflections on Fieldwork in Yakutsk

I began this project with minimal familiarity of Russian culture, politics, or geography, and even less so about the issues and experiences of Indigenous peoples in Russia. As I complete this degree, I find myself with even more questions and curiosities than I started with. I am eager to carry this work forward into further research and projects, guided by the relationships I have established over the past few years and the hope that bringing urban Indigenous women together will be a meaningful project on a broader scale.

Drawing this thesis to a close necessitates the inclusion of a short reflection on my personal experience conducting research as an Indigenous woman in a foreign context with Indigenous women and communities to which I do not belong. Arriving to Yakutsk in May 2018 speaking no Russian and being totally unfamiliar with local social norms and cultural expressions was incredibly intimidating. However, I am grateful to have been accepted quickly into various social circles that allowed me to feel safe, welcomed, and with solid foundations from which to begin my research. My decision to spend two months in Yakutsk before starting any interviews was very wise, giving me time to learn some Russian language, become familiar with the city, and meet Eveny and Evenki women who would eventually assist me in expanding my contacts.

Being able to live, study, and internationalize my expertise on urban indigeneity has been a life-changing opportunity. I have developed confidence in my skills and ambitions as an Indigenous researcher that I may otherwise never have cultivated, and that I am eager to

offer to my community in Vancouver, Canada. I have established lifelong responsibilities and relationships to Eveny and Evenki women navigating urban Russian landscapes and will work to ensure the integrity of those relations in my future work.

I feel immense gratitude for everything that this research project has taught me and everything that it represents to urban Indigenous women around the world. Our stories are valuable, our experiences in different landscape are valid, and the work we do to support our communities looks different for every woman. Our commitment to celebrating differences and our love for expansive ideas demanding attentiveness to our Indigenous vibrance is ancestral wisdom.

5.3 Recommendations Moving Forward

The stories, events, and relationships I engaged with in Yakutsk illuminated the importance of relationships Evenki and Eveny women rely on and expand to navigate challenges of urban *KMNS* life. The many different events happening throughout the city and beyond are seemingly all independent of each other yet linked by the kinships connecting many diverse participants. I should note that I can speak only to strategies of support and assertions of urban indigeneity occurring during the summer, as my observations were contingent on warm weather allowing the events to which I attribute my findings to proceed. For much of the year, Sakha Republic (Yakutia) is the coldest inhabited region on the planet, which likely shifts the landscapes in which urban indigeneity unfolds and engages in the winter months. Some questions that arise from this reality include: how do urban Indigenous community members stay connected during the winter when weather makes certain spaces inaccessible, especially to students, young families, and elders? Do expressions of urban indigeneity significantly shift

during the winter? How do expressions of urban indigeneity associated with the summer season shift to navigate colder, harsher conditions? Furthermore, could the few resources available to Indigenous organizations, dance ensembles, and student collectives in Yakutsk be used to facilitate urban indigenous gatherings together and collaboratively? Further research and community building in Yakutsk will hopefully be able to answer these questions.

A centrally located and accessible space designed to facilitate cultural, educational, and artistic activities regardless of weather conditions would be an asset to Indigenous women in Yakutsk. The many stories I heard about young women relying on dance ensembles as support networks indicate clear investment in further developing expansive and resilient kinship networks throughout Yakutsk. A central space for the many different dance ensembles to gather informally and connect, share dances, and be visible together would allow the energy and passion for engaging in cultural activities to flourish, even in the wintertime. It could also be a space to bring together elders and youth for knowledge exchanges, and to nourish intergenerational connections. Building relationships between the community leaders and women managing dance ensembles in Yakutsk and the urban Indigenous community in Vancouver may offer insight into how best to approach developing urban Indigenous resources and strategies collaboratively.

An important conclusion stemming from this project points to the potential opportunities and reciprocal benefits of building international Indigenous networks and dialogues. Indigenous peoples have long intellectual and community traditions of international relations and responsibilities (Simpson, 2017). Urban indigeneity is becoming increasingly significant as it connects communities and evolves traditions to meet contemporary needs and relations. Settler colonial states and societies are incapable of decolonizing their perceptions

and interactions with indigenous peoples to grasp the full vibrancy of our agency and mobility, so we must elevate our internal perceptions of how our futures are unfolding in both urban and non-urban places. These futures are exciting, filled with exchange and expansion, and developing meaningful dialogues about how we can internationally support each other can profoundly nourish these conversations.

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Appendices

Appendix A: (Russian-Language) Information Letter for Interview

Информационное письмо для рассказчика

Переговоры на тему «Традиции»: чествование женщин из коренных малочисленных народов, живущих в городе Якутске (Республика Саха (Якутия)

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Этот проект отвечает требованиям для получения степени магистра в Университете Северной Британской Колумбии. Исследование будет способствовать пониманию того, как городские женщины из числа коренных народов в Якутске создают и поддерживают свою самобытность, посредством изучения их личных рассказов, в контексте которых

«традиционность», как таковая, имеет первостепенное значение для определения индивидуальности женщины. Рассказы и информация, собранные и записанные во время этого проекта, будут включены в публично доступный научный тезис для того, чтобы выполнить требования магистерской степени. Истории могут также включаться в публикации, связанные с вышеуказанным тезисом, а также быть использованы в научных конференциях.

Этот проект финансируется Советом по исследованиям в области социальных и гуманитарных наук Канады

Почему Вас просят принять участие в этом проекте?

Вас просят принять участие в этом проекте в качестве рассказчика, потому что Вы определили себя как женщина из коренного малочисленного народа, проживающая в Якутске, а также проявили желание поделиться своей историей.

Участие в этом проекте является добровольным, и Вы никоим образом не обязаны принимать участие. Вы не обязаны делиться историями, которые посчитаете не уместным рассказывать. Вы можете отменить свое участие в любое время до, во время или после того, как вы поделитесь историями. Вам не нужно будет объяснять уход из этого проекта. Если Вы уже поделились историями со мной к тому времени, как изъявили желание уйти, запись рассказа будет возвращена Вам или уничтожена по запросу. Полученная информация не будет включена в какие-либо составляющие научной работы, если Вы не подтвердили согласие.

Что произойдет, если Вы скажете: «Да, я хочу быть частью этого проекта»?

• Сначала Вам будет предложено подумать о конкретном месте в Якутске, которое имеет для Вас, Вашей семьи или Вашего сообщества особое значение. Вас попросят встретиться со мной и переводчиком на данном месте.

•Когда мы встретимся, вам будет предложено поделиться столькими историями, сколькими вам удобно.

• Все аудиозаписи Ваших историй будут анонимизированы, если вы не согласны с тем, что Ваше имя будет фигурировать рядом с рассказанными историями. У Вас будет время подумать об этом до, во время и после записи.

• Краткий обзор исследования будет предоставлен Вам на русском языке, когда я вернусь в Якутск в 2019 году. У Вас также будет доступ к написанному тезису (на английском языке), который выйдет после августа 2019 года.

Существуют ли какие-либо риски во время участия в этом проекте?

Я не представляю никаких физических рисков для всех, кто участвует в этом проекте. Существует низкий риск эмоционального стресса во время повествования, но если в любой момент Вы решите, что хотите прекратить рассказ историй или захотите взять паузу в вашем рассказе, это абсолютно нормально. Укажите, есть ли у Вас волнения или вопросы относительно рисков, связанных с процессами истолкования. Я не представляю никаких рисков для вас, если Вы решите, что Ваше имя стоит оставить неизвестным, так как это будет выбор, который вы можете сделать в любой момент до, во время или после вашей записи..

Каковы преимущества участия?

Очень мало было написано о городских женщинах-аборигенах в Республике Саха (Якутия). Участвуя в этом проекте, Вы станете частью интересных бесед о важности понимания городских интересов женщин из числа коренных народов.

Как ваша личность будет защищена?

Во время процесса повествования всё записывающее оборудование можно легко скрыть, чтобы обеспечить анонимность, если вы хотите рассказать истории в общественном месте. По завершении повествования, Ваша анонимность будет гарантирована по Вашему запросу. Для транскрипции записей будет использован код вместо Вашего имени. Таким образом, информация, раскрывающая вашу личность, не будет выпущена без Вашего согласия. Однако, если Вы хотите, чтобы Ваше имя ассоциировалось с вашими историями, можете сделать запрос.

Что будет с вашими историями после их записи?

Ваши истории будут записаны и транскрибированы, а транскрипция вернется к вам на USB-накопителе для того, чтобы вы ознакомились и по желанию отредактировали. Обратите внимание, что для первоначального процесса транскрипции может потребоваться время. После того, как вы получили транскрипцию, сообщите мне об изменениях, которые Вы хотели бы сделать в течение двух недель.

Мой руководитель Гейл Фондал, переводчик и я будут единственными, кто имеет доступ к вашим аудиозаписям. Переводчик/транскриптор согласятся сохранить всю информацию конфиденциальной. Все аудиозаписи будут храниться на жестком диске с защитным паролем. Этот жесткий диск будет храниться в закрытом офисе в Северо-Восточном Федеральном университете. Все оригинальные аудиофайлы в том числе

транскрипция на русском будут возвращены вам на USB-накопителе в течение одного года или двух месяцев. Я буду хранить копии всех файлов (текст и аудио) в течение пяти лет после завершения этого проекта, после чего они будут уничтожены.

С кем Вы можете связаться, если у вас есть вопросы?

Если у Вас есть вопросы по этому проекту, свяжитесь со мной по электронной почте (см. выше) или с руководителем Гейл Фондал (gail.fondahl@unbc.ca), на английском или русском языках.

С кем Вы можете связаться, если у вас есть жалобы или опасения по поводу исследования?

Если у Вас есть какие-либо проблемы или жалобы по поводу Ваших прав в качестве участника исследования или по поводу самого процесса интервью, пожалуйста, обращайтесь, в Отдел исследований Университета Северной Британской Колумбии по электронной почте:reb@unbc.ca (Вы можете написать на русском языке). Вы также можете связаться с Международным офисом СВФУ (lv.vinokurova@s-vfu.ru или (4112) 36-14-53. Письма могут быть написаны на русском или на якутском, далее Ваши сообщения будут переведены на английский и переданы в Отдел исследований Университета Северной Британской Колумбии.

Спасибо за внимание!

Appendix B: (Russian-Language) Story Prompts

Адзик Сэйша

Вопросы-подсказки рассказчику

Вводные вопросы: С кем я беседую?

1. Пожалуйста, расскажите мне о себе, о своей семье в пределах таких подробней и деталей, в которых Вам удобно.

Вопросы о конкретном месте

2. Как называется место, в котором Вы попросили нас сегодня встретиться?
3. Можете ли Вы, пожалуйста, рассказать, что для Вас значит это место? Почему оно является особенным?
4. Можете ли Вы, пожалуйста, рассказать историю о том, как Вы в первый раз оказались здесь?
5. Знаете ли Вы, является ли это место так же особенным и для других женщин из малочисленных народностей Якутии?
6. Как долго вы живете в Якутске?
7. Если рассказчик переехал в Якутск:
   Можете ли Вы, пожалуйста, рассказать историю о том, как Вы в первый раз приехали в Якутск? Откуда Вы приехали: из поселка или из другого города Республики Саха (Якутия)/ России?

   Расскажите, пожалуйста, историю своего переезда, и как она повлияла на Вас?

   А) С кем Вы переехали в Якутск: одна, с семьей или переехали к родным, которые уже тут жили?

8. Если рассказчик родился в Якутске:

Можете ли Вы, пожалуйста, рассказать о том, как вы выросли в Якутске? Имеются ли у Вас запомнившиеся истории или воспоминания из детства в городе?

А) Обсуждала ли Ваша семья когда-либо причину того, почему было принято решение растить Вас в городе, а не в улусе? Есть ли у них своя история о том, что с подвигло их переехать в город?

9. Что значит для Вас и Вашей семьи то, что Вы являетесь женщиной из коренного малочисленного народа и живете в Якутске?

10. Чувствуете ли Вы то, что быть женщиной из числа коренных малочисленных народов с городской среде Якутска отличается от того, что испытывают женщины из числа коренных малочисленных народов в сельской местности?

А) Отличаются ли гендерные роли мужчин и женщин в зависимости от того, где они живут: в городской или сельской местности? Расскажите, пожалуйста, как вы узнали об этом? Испытали ли Вы разделения гендерных ролей на себе?

Б) Есть ли у членов Вашей семьи(например, у Вашей мамы) истории о том, как отличаются гендерные роли в городской среде и в сельской среде? Считают ли они, что гендерные роли изменились с тех времен, когда они росли?

11. Считаете ли Вы, что можете быть вовлеченной в традиционную культуру, язык и общество коренного малочисленного народа, живя в городе?

А) Насколько часто это возможно? Какие виды традиционной культуру Вам доступны?

Б) Где эти возможности можно осуществить? Что для Вас значит то место? Расскажите, пожалуйста, о том, как вы принимаете участие, бываете вовлечены в традиционную культуру Вашего народа, живя в Якутске?

В) Если нет, то, возможно, Вы ездили за пределы города, чтобы практиковать свою традиционную культуру? Расскажите, пожалуйста, о том времени, когда Вы ездили куда-либо, чтобы участвовать в церемониях или принимать участие в иных видах традиционной культуры?

12. Знаете ли Вы случаи, когда кто-либо был доброжелателен и приветлив к Вашей культуре в Якутске?

А) Каким образом люди, не относящиеся к КМНС, проявляют интерес, поддерживают и приветствуют Вашу культуру?

13. Знаете ли Вы случаи, когда кто-либо был не достаточно доброжелателен или даже против вашей культуры?

А) Каким образом люди, не относящиеся к КМНС, показывают свою недоброжелательность к представителям КМНС и их культуре?

14.Разрешено ли Вам поделиться со мной Вашими традиционными рассказами? Если да, имеются ли какие-либо рассказы о женщинах из коренных малочисленных народов, живущих в городах?

А) Рассказываются ли эти рассказы по-разному в зависимости от того, где вы находитесь: в городской среде или с сельской местности?

15. Есть ли у Вас какие-либо истории о местах или событиях, которые дали вам возможность чувствовать себя и свою культуру частью города?