Mónica: Okay so, are you ready to begin?

Michelle: Yeah, I think so.

Mónica: You probably know all the questions [laughs]. But would you like to introduce yourself?

[00:00:10.02]

Michelle: Sure. My name is Michelle Lorna Nahanee. I'm from the Squamish Nation in North Vancouver. I'm a media artist, almost a PhD student, considering it, anyways. And yeah, I'm definitely an activist and I identify myself as a matriarch.

Mónica: And how would you define that?

[00:00:29.03]

Michelle: Yeah, so I came to matriarchy, I've been writing. I just wrote a paper called, "Decolonizing Identity: Indian Girl to Squamish Matriarch." And I wrote about all the names that I've lived under. So I was born Squamish. Until I was 5 years old, I only knew my family and being Squamish and hunting and eating wild foods and being, sort of in a big pile of kids, I guess, right. And then I went to school and I found out that I was an Indian. And that I was not as smart as other people and sort of all of these constructions were imposed on me. And then my family became involved in activism so we were actually called "Native" for a while. So identifying as Native women. And then Aboriginal and Indigenous. And First Nations. And now I'm back to Squamish! I've been seeing myself as a matriarch. You know, so that would be a woman who, you know, cares in a feminist way, like wants to change the world, wants to oppose patriarchy, wants to, you know mother a space. So, to me mothering means to be care-centred. It also means to give reprimands, where they need to be, so be critical, be open. Operate in the space in the ways that my aunties trained me to, be a leader.

Mónica: Mhm. Can I be a matriarch, too?

Michelle: Of course you can! Please! Yeah.

Mónica: I like that definition.

Michelle: It's a- it's taken off. Yeah, I feel like, I mean it's just this word that's, you know, embodied, you know, a certain imagery, you know. But the more, more women can see themselves as matriarchs and really take on that power, and change the word to mean what you need it to mean to you.

[00:02:05.18]

I would definitely see you as a matriarch with all of your feminist work and, and the way that you see the world, and the way that you share that out with the world. So please. Please use the word.

Mónica: Good category.

Michelle: Mhm.

Mónica: And how does your work have to do with memory?

[00:02:21.06]

Michelle: Well the Squamish Matriarchy project is a future project of mine. And it's something that I've touched upon in my MA work. But the memory component comes in because I'm reaching back to feelings and memories that I had of who I was, you know, before I entered the school system. So what did I understand of being Squamish, you know, when I was in that pile of kids, surrounded by the aunties and uncles and eating the wild food. And so that's a component of my personal memory work and what I'm hoping to do through my project is talk to other women and gather those stories and make that into an art piece or a media project to share the stories and really bring it back into our community. You know, Indigenous women are, we face the highest levels of violence in our country, and so, I'm hoping to, you know, just expand out, you know, the power of decolonizing identity. You know, I mean it's definitely other peoples' jobs too, to not be violent, but it can also help us protect ourselves, the more that we see ourselves in this way.

[00:03:25.10]

You know, I feel like I had a lot of interactions with violence, you know, once I was in the school system and as a younger woman, that, you know, I may not have if I viewed myself in a different way.

Mónica: It seems to me like your work definitely is a form of activism and resistance. How do you go about- is it something like integral of the work, of the way you work, always? Your politics and your art work and your political work and everything? Or is it something you started doing later on. Or how did you start doing it?

[00:03:58.01]

Michelle: Hmm. Yeah I think it's a family trait. Like within my family I have very strong aunties. I actually didn't grow up with my own mother. I grew up- I was put into a foster system and I was put into like a highly institutionalized system that disconnected me, but then I was taken away from that system and I was raised by my aunties. So I have four mothers basically and then even in my adult life, I've found more [laughs]. So I've built this wonderful army.

[00:04:25.02]

So my activism and my resistance, yeah, it just comes very naturally to me. I feel like I was trained to keep interrogating that system and you know I was taught to understand that it was a system that's wrong. It wasn't me that was wrong. It took me a while to get there, but, yeah I just feel so strongly about it. It's all connected to me. I'm also the mother of a girl and so raising her of course has just strengthened my activism to make the world a safer space but, politically I've worked for many Indigenous women's organizations: The Native Women's Association of Canada, I recently just worked with the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, and so, you know. I use my skills as a professional communicator where I can to support Indigenous women's space in this country. Yeah, it's just naturally who I am, I think.

[00:05:15.24]

But, you know, my education has contributed, has strengthened my activism, absolutely. It's given me more framework and also more impetus to disseminate these ideas. So.

Mónica: Do you think of one audience you talk to? Or several audiences? Or, because in terms of doing work that has to do with activism, sometimes there's like a one, your own community, and bringing those memories together.

Michelle: Mhm.

Mónica: Or whom you want to share these memories with. How do you work in terms of- who do you work for?

[00:05:46.23]

Michelle: Hm. Yeah definitely my community first, right. My own Squamish community, you know, my cousins. And my, yeah the place where I come from is where it starts, you know. I mean, there are audiences of course. If I, once I do the Squamish Matriarchy work- so I did a talk in Vancouver called "Squamish Matriarchs." It was delivered in the City of Vancouver to a very diverse audience. You know, to carry that message of who we are and what we care about. So, yeah the audience is whoever will listen, you know [laughs] it's really what I'm doing, you know. Like with any art, you don't really know who will listen. You know what you care about and the ideas that you want to share with the world. I even think of it as "things that I wish I knew as a younger woman." So my audience is even like a younger version of myself. How would I have liked to understand this when I was eighteen. So that's sort of where I start with it.

[00:06:39.18]

Mónica: And does the idea of intervening in the archive resonate with you?

Michelle: Yes. Absolutely, absolutely. I've done a lot of research on archival photos of Indigenous women. I've been looking for photos of my family and also just understanding the story of how the systems within the archive, the capital Archive, have justified the dispossession of Indigenous lands, right. So if we're framed in the ancient, if we're framed as powerless, it is easier, it made it easier to take the land away. And then, you know, when I'm trying to find this, I have to actually use the search words "squaw." Right, like I have to use racial derogatory terms to find images of my family, right, so. I absolutely want to disrupt that. So thinking I was very excited to find this project and thinking about new archives, you know. And even within my own Squamish Nation I encourage our own nations' archives. And then maybe [laughs] that's a big project to try to, you know, disrupt those federal labels, the taxonomy of "Indian," for example, right. To try to add names.

[00:07:53.12]

I'm in communications so, to me the idea of photographs of "unknown Indians," like that has to be, we have to just finish that idea. We have to have names. Just like everybody else has, right. So disrupting the archive is an excellent project.

Mónica: And creating, disrupting what exists, and creating new ones.

Michelle: That's right.

[00:08:13.05]

Mónica: How do you archive your archives? How does your work archive all this material? How does it bring it together?

Michelle: Yeah I mean I think it will be in a digital space. Like I said the Matriarchy project is a future project of mine. But I think it will be in a digital space, and then I'd like to do an exhibit. It's probably a book. I'm also a graphic designer so it's probably a book. And then, you know, yeah I'd like it to be an exhibit and then probably be online at some point. I think, you know, within my own nation I just need to find some more information of how are we archiving things. I do have a couple of Elders who have worked in that system, so I have people I can access and interview. Try to put some of my energy to make it happen.

[00:08:54.00]

Mónica: Well you talk about the relationship with your aunties and with your daughter, it seems to me like the intergenerational at least in the family aspect of your life is probably very present there. Is it also in the kind of things you're bringing together and what you'd like to do with your work?

Michelle: Mhm. Yes, absolutely. It's a huge part of it. And then it's even reaching back. You know, for example, my mentor, her grandmother, she wants to share her grandmother's story. And her grandmother actually lived in our community pre-contact. Right, so there are a few people in the community that still have access to that knowledge of how things were pre-contact. And so I'm kind of excited about finding that information out and recording it in a good way for, you know, my grandchildren and great-grandchildren. And how can we control that information. You know, share it in a good way with our families.

[00:09:50.23]

Mónica: And is there work with younger generations so they become more aware of this?

Michelle: I think so, yeah. And it's really just happening in our community now. Like we have our own school for example within our community. And so there is now space to share knowledge, you know, that isn't mediated, you know between the government, where it could be Squamish to Squamish. So I'm pretty excited about that, too. I think that's where the knowledge needs to be. So yeah, I hope that I can contribute in some way.

[00:10:21.21]

Mónica: Is the archive oral or written? And is the way you transmit your information in both or what is it like now? Have the languages been also turned into written word or is the archive still oral.

Michelle: Yeah I think it, well it's all oral. It's all oral still. There are some written accounts of, you know, the traditional stories and things like that. I'm looking more for personal stories and stories of matriarchy, and, "Tell me about women's leadership in your family." Right, so these will be oral stories that I think people will share alongside photography if I can find, you know family photos and start to archive that. I'm not looking to share like highly sensitive cultural information, like our ceremonies or any kind of anthropological approach to the knowledge. To me it's really, I want to focus on the Matriarchy and more of the personal stories of women's strengths.

[00:11:16.24]

Mónica: Mhm. I was meaning more as an artist, one thing is to do video, which is more oral, and another thing is to, you mentioned doing a book as well. And as an artist coming from an oral tradition makes you work differently.

Michelle: That's right.

Mónica: Or if you have both after, with the educational system.

Michelle: Yeah.

Mónica: ...you've been through. And university and stuff.

Michelle: No that is such a good question, you know. And I see it, yeah- I don't think I'd want to do a book like in the sense that I would, you know, try to third party peoples' information. Maybe, you know, a photograph and a key quote. That's a good question. I don't want to re-colonize the stories, right.

[00:11:58.01]

So I need to work that out. Yeah, figure out, you know, what's a respectful methodology. Which is kind of why I'm here at this group to really look at, you know, what does participatory media look like and how can I be the researcher but really be more about making space for the stories. It's still a question for me.

Mónica: Hm.

Michelle: Mhm.

[00:12:18.18]

Mónica: And how has aging informed the way you think of yourself as an activist? Has this changed through time?

Michelle: Oh, absolutely [laughs].

Mónica: What has your process been like?

Michelle: Oh, well I'm so grateful now. I certainly wouldn't go back in time [laughs]. Yeah I think I'm just a lot calmer now. I'm, you know, more confident. Yeah I'm really actually grateful for aging and I think- well when I look at how, at my whole life span, like everything has been very intergenerational. You know, like I'm, it's just the way my family works. The way that my culture works, in that, I still visit with my aunties and uncles. I'm still treated actually like a young person in my family which is really cute because, you know, I'm not a young person anymore [laughs], but. Yeah, so, how has aging- and I think- yeah and I have access to people who are older than me. I don't have access to my grandparents. They did pass early. But I've found other people in my life. And also reaching out to younger people. My daughter's twenty-one now and so I have access to all those awesome millennial minds, you know. And I find that I'm very inspired actually by their approach to things. No, aging is great.

[00:13:34.11]

Mónica: When you say, I'm glad, sort of like "I wouldn't go back"- why? Because I feel the same. I think I feel now I have a confidence I didn't have before. I have a possibility of doing things. But that might be my case, I don't know why you're glad you're at the stage you're at.

Michelle: [Laughs] Yeah I think it's the same. It's the confidence, it's like, just to be able to reflect on it, I think it was. I mean I went back to school as a late learner. I didn't start my graduate school until, you know, I was in my mid-forties, right, so. I came to school like with a lot of experience that I was, you know, trying to find frameworks for. And so, I just wouldn't go back. I was less confident then, I wasn't aware, you know, of the constructions that were impeding me. I wasn't aware, you know, that my lack of power, you know, wasn't my own pathology. It was, you know, I was in a bucket. And I didn't know it. So. I wouldn't go back to the bucket [laughs]. I prefer to be on the outside, you know, pulling people out [laughs]. Yeah. Or at least just explaining the bucket. Yeah, so it's good.

[00:14:41.26]

Mónica: I don't know if there's anything else you'd like to add.

Michelle: I feel pretty confident about that. That was really what I wanted to focus on. The Matriarchy, and then my own story, and then the story of my project. Do you guys- you guys can see my project?

Jess: Oh yeah. That was so good.

Audience member: Mhm. Yeah.

Michelle: Okay. Good, thank you!

Audience member: It was very nice to listen to you.

Audience: Thank you.

Mónica: So from now on I'm a matriarch.

Michelle: Yes you are!

Mónica: I like that one, I like that one.

Michelle: Yeah, that's good.

Mónica: I'm a feminist artist matriarch.

Michelle: That's right!

Mónica: Thank you.

Michelle: ...you're with the matriarchy [laughs].

[00:15:16.05]

[End of tape]