LAND, FAMILY AND IDENTITY:
Contextualizing Metis health and well-being

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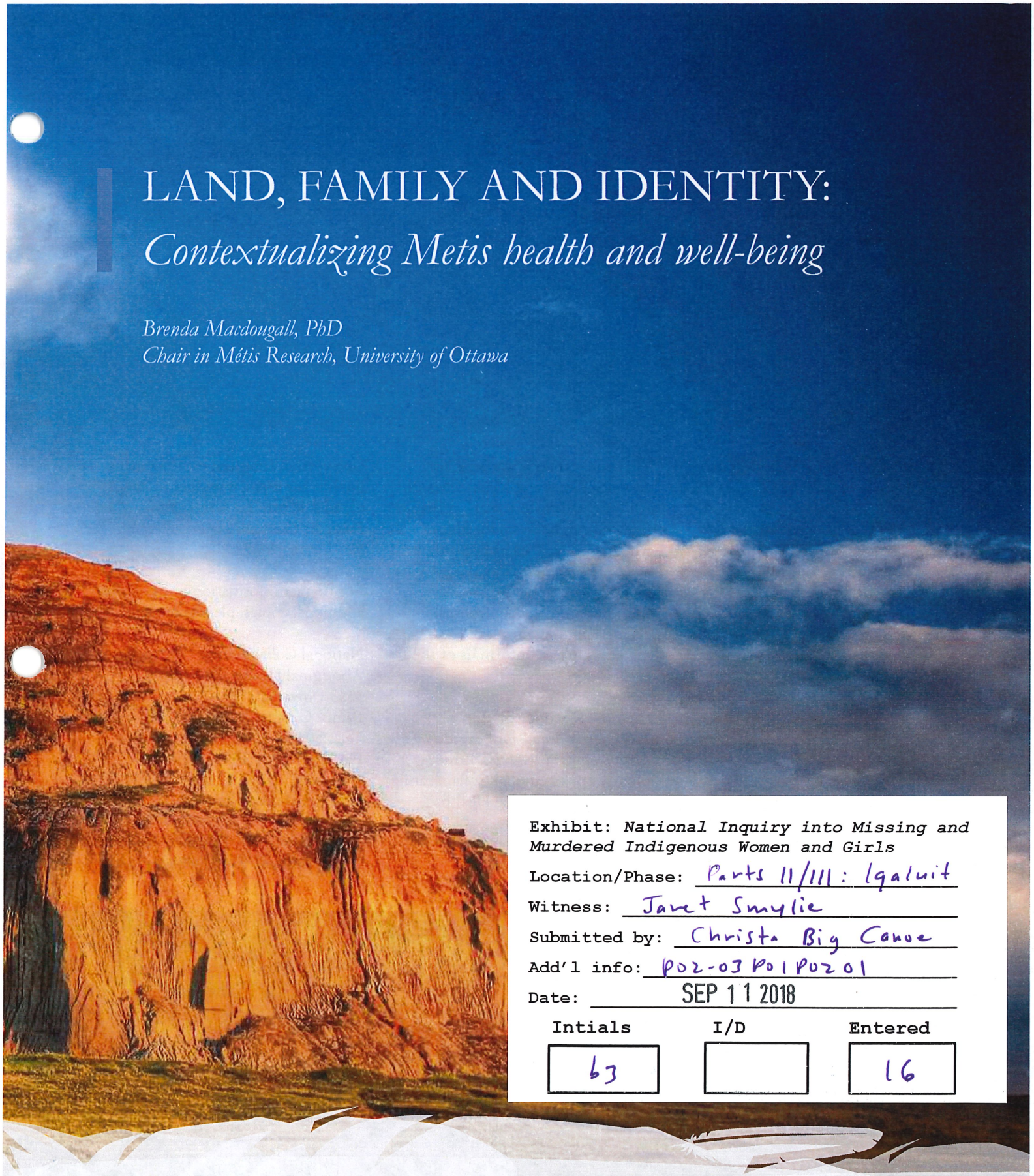


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SETTING THE CONTEXT



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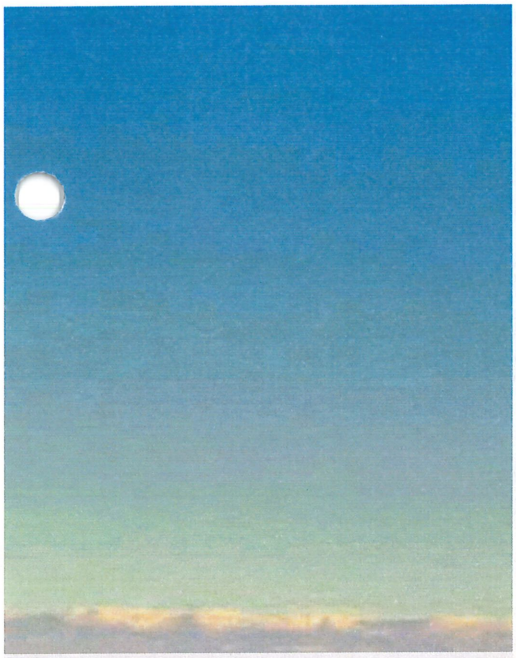
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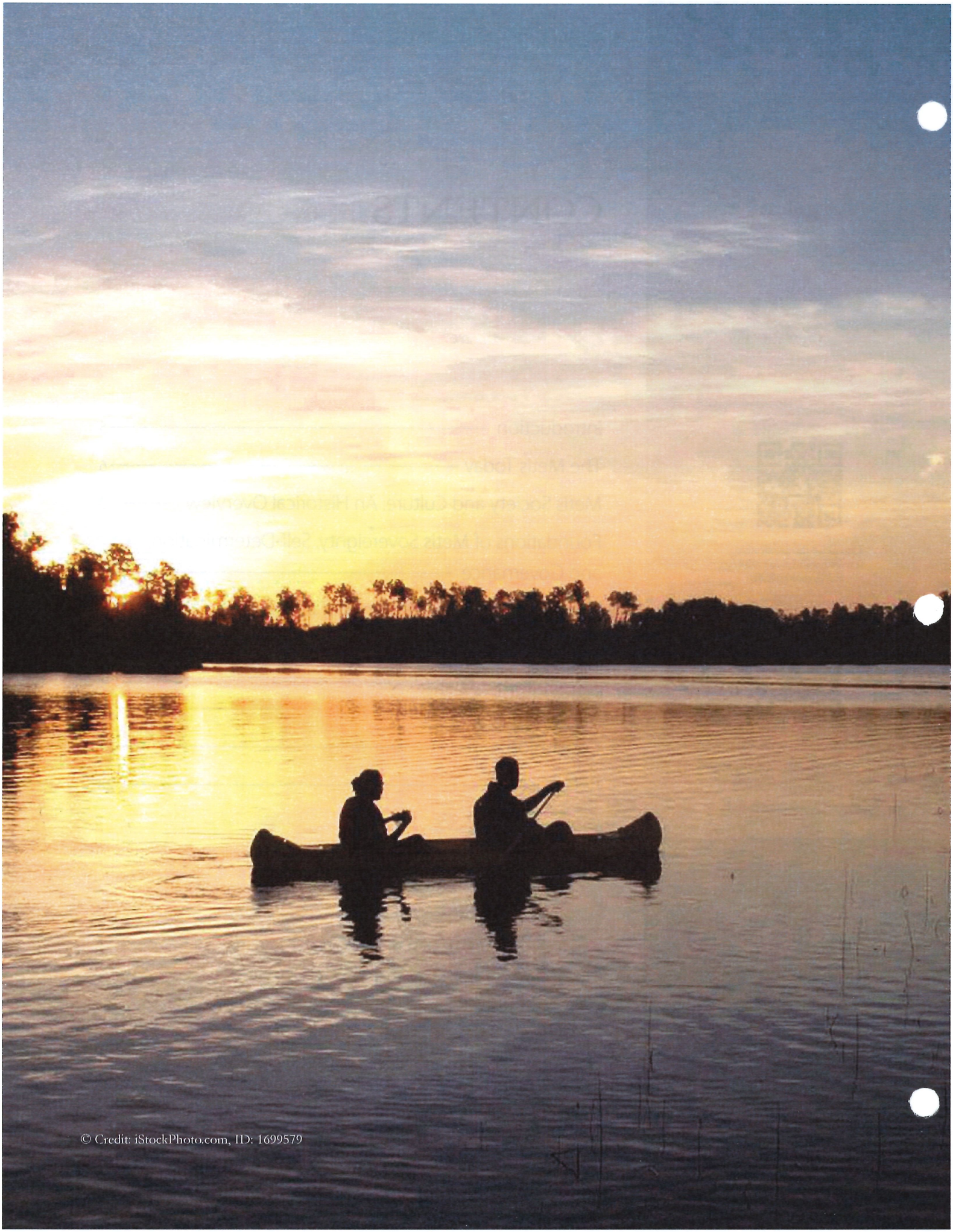
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INTRODUCTION



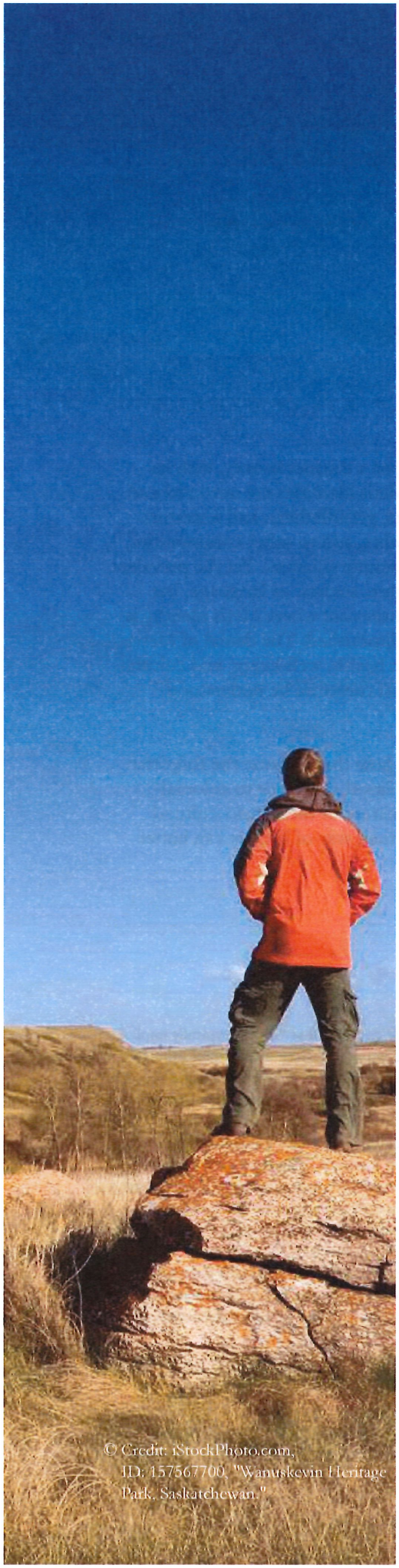
As a post-contact Indigenous people, the Metis, over a short period of time, developed a distinct society, with its own distinct cultural, economic, and social orientation.[1] As an Indigenous people, Metis identities are nurtured and sustained by the stories, traditions and cultural practices taught by our grandmothers, grandfathers, and ancestors. Metis communities located along old fur trade networks were connected to one another, and to other communities, because of extensive kinship networks that nurtured and sustained political and economic alliances. Yet the prevalent belief among Canada and its citizens today is that Metis people have no history, culture, society, or language, but are instead a collection of individuals with Indian ancestry. This has created an environment where Metis identity is regularly challenged and their overall sense of self, peoplehood, and nationhood is diminished. The denial of Metis peoples' Indigeneity remains one of the most impactful social determinants of Metis health, well-being, and cultural safety.[2] The processes that have led to current health challenges facing the Metis must therefore be understood within the context of their own history as well as Canada's colonial reality.

What follows then explains who the Metis were historically in order to demonstrate how they became the forgotten people by the latter half of the 20th century and explore their social, cultural and political resistance to colonial policies of division and dislocation in contemporary Canada. By understanding the nature of their socio-cultural and political history, place within Canadian Confederation, and attempts to protect their way of life, we can better appreciate the issues around the social determinants of health.

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[1] Note that in this document "Metis" is written without an acute accent over the "e." The reason for this choice is that "Métis" typically implies a specific historical circumstance, associated with both French and Catholic influences, that originated with the eastern trade routes prior to the fall of New France and the Scottish takeover of the St. Lawrence trade. The term "Halfbreed" historically referred to English and Scottish mixed-bloods who came out of the Hudson's Bay Company trade, but then became the term of choice to governments and Canadians in the 19th and 20th century. The use of the unaccented word used here though is meant to denote mixed-descent people who created communities for themselves that were separate and distinct from both their Indian and European ancestors, regardless of their association with fur companies or European/ Euro-Canadian paternity. Furthermore, while many Metis have Cree forebears, there are also those with Dene, Scottish, English, Blackfoot, and Iroquois heritages. Using "Métis," therefore, privileges Frenchness over their Aboriginal heritages or alternative European lineages and consequently the unaccented "Metis" signifies that the term is being used to encompass all of those who were part of the historic Metis nation and their descendants. However, the modern political organizations and Government of Canada do use the acute accent and so when those organizations are referred to, their choice will be used.

[2] There is a growing literature on the principle of cultural safety or the idea that the health and well-being of Indigenous peoples is dependent on acknowledging their beliefs and practices and recognizing the inequalities of health-care, education, employment, and social interactions. See Anderson's (2011) book, *Life Stages and Native Women: Memory, Teachings, and Story Medicine*, in which the teachings of fourteen women elders from across Canada illustrate how traditional knowledge can be applied to rebuilding communities today.



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THE METIS TODAY

According to Statistics Canada, in 2011 Metis people represented 32.3% of the total Aboriginal[3] population (Statistics Canada, 2013). While the largest self-identified Metis populations are in Alberta (96,865), Ontario (86,015), and British Columbia (69,475), the largest per capita populations are in Manitoba (78,830), Saskatchewan (52,450), and the Northwest Territories (2,750).[4] Concentration in these provinces and territory reflect the historical regions where the first Metis communities emerged in the late 18th century when economic and politically strategic marriages between fur traders and Indigenous women became commonplace. Consequently, this part of Canada is claimed as the historic Metis homeland by the Metis nation.[5] Today, however, the Metis are predominantly urban and have spread out across the country, often living in cities located outside the homeland. This contemporary reality of dislocation from the historic homeland is not surprising given Canada's history of first marginalizing, and then denying the existence of, the Metis.

According to the 2011 census data, there were 46,325 Métis living in Winnipeg, 31,780 in Edmonton, 18,485 in Vancouver, 17,040 in Calgary, 11,520 in Saskatoon, 9,980 in Toronto, 8,840 in Montreal, 8,225 in Regina, 7,900 in Prince Albert, and 6,860 in Ottawa-Gatineau (Statistics Canada, 2013).

[3] The term 'Aboriginal' refers to all of the original peoples of Canada and their descendants. The Canadian constitution recognizes three separate groups of Aboriginal peoples: First Nations, Inuit and Métis.

[4] There were more Metis people in the Northwest Territories prior to the Sahtu Dene and Métis comprehensive land claim in 1993, but with the signing of that agreement, Metis signatories were awarded status as Indians and so the population has shifted dramatically in terms of the legal categorization. As of 2011, the Metis population in the Northwest Territories was 8%, while in Manitoba they represented 6.7% of the total population and 5.2% in Saskatchewan (Statistics Canada, 2013). When Statistics Canada began collecting data on Aboriginal people in 1996, they have consistently asked two specific questions on its National Household Survey: Whether people had Aboriginal ancestry, and whether they possessed an Aboriginal identity. The purpose was to differentiate between those people who had at least one Aboriginal ancestor but may not think of themselves as being Aboriginal people, and those who not only had ancestry but whose identity was associated with that ancestry.

[5] Please note, in some instances "nation" has not been capitalized in order to refer to the broader, non-politically defined Metis group and mark a clear distinction between them and the political entity that represents the nation as well as specific instances of overt political action/movement/organizations. Furthermore, it is important to note that many people who are Metis do not ascribe to any of the current political policies and so for them to feel included in this document, the term is not capitalized in certain contexts.

While the Metis experience with colonialism was different from other Indigenous people, the outcomes were often the same - poor health, poverty, and a lack of educational attainment. A decade ago, for instance, only 13% of Metis between the ages of 25 and 56 had a high school diploma and only 9% of Metis completed a university degree (Janz, Seto, & Turner, 2009). The annual median income for Metis people is approximately $21,000, $6,000 less than was earned by non-Indigenous Canadians (White, & Dyck, 2013). This discrepancy in wages and educational achievement has directly impacted the health and well-being of contemporary Metis families.

With uncertain economic futures, Metis families struggling to make ends meet have been more likely to experience chronic health problems such as diabetes, obesity, asthma, and lower overall life expectancies. A study conducted in Manitoba concluded that the life expectancy for Metis in that province was 5 to 6 years lower than the general population and that Metis women were 2 times and Metis men 1.6 times as likely to get diabetes as non-Indigenous people (Martens et al., 2011). Furthermore, Metis living with diabetes deal with a range of co-morbidities and are almost three times as likely to report high blood pressure and heart disease, and twice as likely to report a loss of vision than non-Indigenous people with the disease. According to that same study, census data from 2006 further indicated that 54% of Metis people over the age of 15 had at least one diagnosed chronic condition, including arthritis and/or rheumatism (21%), high blood pressure (16%), asthma (14%), and stomach problems or intestinal ulcers (12%). A more recent study of Ontario Metis concluded that 70% of Metis adults do not consume the recommended daily amount of vegetables and fruits and that over half of Metis adults are either overweight or obese—all risk factors for these types of conditions (Métis Nation of Ontario, 2012).

One of the legacies of Canada's colonial past is that there is very little comprehensive data related to understanding Metis health and well-being. There is a lack of longitudinal Metis health data and census information because of the manner in which the federal government managed its fiduciary obligations towards Indians, Metis, and Inuit, the three constitutionally recognized Aboriginal peoples in Canada (sec. 35, Constitution Act, 1982). While Canada assumed a fiduciary responsibility for 'Indians' (a category in Canadian law which has defined those with Indian status via the *Indian Act* since 1876) and accepted the same legislative jurisdiction for the Inuit because of a Supreme Court decision, R v. Eskimo, in 1939 (made "Eskimo" constitutionally the same as "Indian"), it has consistently denied jurisdictional authority for the Metis, declaring them to be the responsibility of provinces (Macdougall, 2016).[6] Because of the fiduciary responsibility, administration of services for Indians and Inuit required Indian Affairs to maintain up-to-date statistical information on those populations, a requirement that never existed for the Metis. It was only in 1996 that Statistics Canada began a targeted approach to collecting data on Metis people and has, since then, at least tracked as best as possible this population.

Consequently, there are significant information gaps for establishing baseline health data, income, and educational statistics related to Metis people, which has, in turn, created pragmatic geographical and jurisdictional barriers to conducting research and administering appropriate services for Metis people (Evans et al., 2012). As a result, between the late 19th century and end of the 20th century, while we know some important things about the Metis, we lack any comprehensive statistical knowledge necessary for conducting health research, developing programs, or making definitive statements about the health and well-being of Metis people. What contemporary data we do have, when triangulated with the lived experiences of Metis people, nevertheless, tells us a great deal not only about contemporary life, but also serves as a window into the historical experience of colonialism and resultant intergenerational trauma.



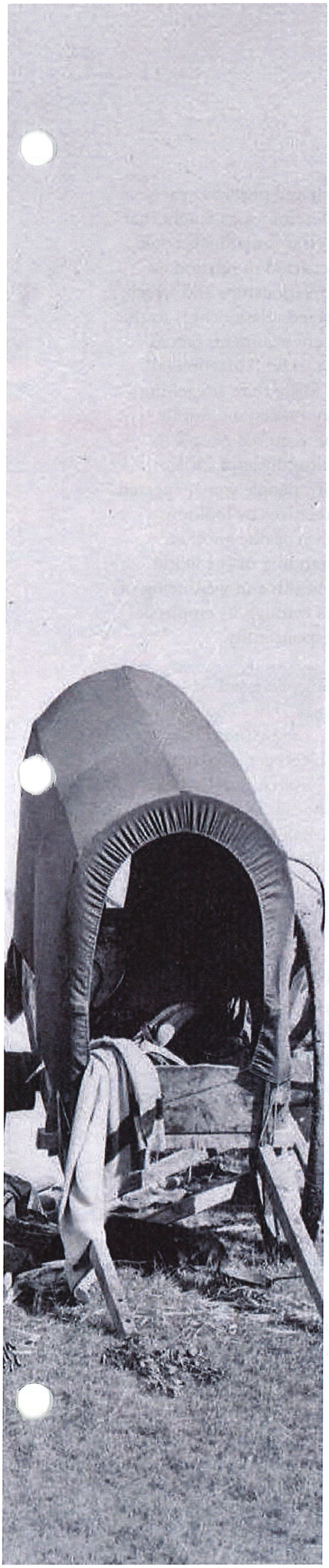
[6] A fiduciary responsibility or duty is a legal principle whereby someone, the fiduciary, has assumed the responsibility to act for or on the behalf of another for their care and well-being - in this case status Indians and Inuit.

Family [to our old people] meant sharing all things - wealth, knowledge, happiness and pain. It meant brotherhood, loving and caring enough about each other to be honest, and from that honesty, gathering strength to change those things which would hurt us all.

Maria Campbell, 1973 (as cited in Campbell, 1981, p. 10).



© Credit: Library and Archives Canada, ID: DAPDCAP90314, "Camp scene of Métis people with carts on the prairie, 1872-1873."



METIS SOCIETY AND CULTURE: AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The Metis nation arose out of a unique socio-cultural context centred on specific economic activities associated with the fur trade, which, in turn, led to the development of political distinctiveness in the early 19th century. Born into the fur trade, the Metis worked in a variety of occupations and their paternal ancestry was drawn from French, Scottish, and English traders while their maternal ancestry came from primarily, although not exclusively, Cree, Dene, Saulteaux and/or Anishinaabe, and Assiniboine women. Although the first generation were born to white and Indian parents, subsequent generations of Metis people mostly intermarried with one another, forming separate communities. So while the marriages of their ancestors were mixed, the Metis people were not. As a result, although the Metis are often characterized today as a people in-between, they saw themselves - and were regarded by others who had contact with them - as distinct.

Through extensive kinship networks and shared experiences, Metis people interacted with the natural and spiritual world in a way that reflected their worldview, which included a profound shared sense of mutual responsibility for each another. Because of this, it was understood that personal wellness and health were closely tied to the well-being of others as well as to the ability to extend family networks as widely as possible. People who were unwell or poor or to be pitied were in fact people who had no relatives. Within this social structure, if someone became incapacitated or was unable to work or care for themselves, they could rely on their family and community for support.

> Family [to our old people] meant sharing all things - wealth, knowledge, happiness and pain. It meant brotherhood, loving and caring enough about each other to be honest, and from that honesty, gathering strength to change those things which would hurt us all. - Maria Campbell, 1973 (as cited in Campbell, 1981, p. 10).

The Cree term for this way of being or worldview is *wahkootowin*, which is simply defined as *all my relations*, a concept common to many Indigenous cultures. The emphasis on the extended family was fostered through the creation of physical and spiritual relationships between people (living, ancestral, those still to come), land, the spirit world, and creatures with



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whom they shared physical space. Everyone, therefore, was taught that who they were as individuals could only be understood in relation to their family relationships and which, in turn, reflected relationships to the community, environment, sacred world, and outsiders (Macdougall, 2006, 2010). More than a teaching about how to understand family, wahkootowin required people to behave in culturally appropriate ways. In short, people were expected to be good relatives by looking out and caring for one another. This understanding of the world ensured the health and well-being of communities through its emphasis on shared responsibility.

> When people were sick, they couldn't work. They couldn't earn their living, or anything. They couldn't go and get anything. Like when my grandfather was sick. I was stuck because I was trying to work but I had to be home to look after him. Well, I got pretty hard up. My cousins … all got together and went out and cut some poles and sold them. They helped me out for groceries and stuff that I needed. We did that for each other. When I was well enough, I helped a lot of people. Same somebody died, and they needed help to dig the graves, or they needed help in getting food. I'd go to town and bring them stuff to help them and I'd go and do a lot of work for them. And everybody did that. - Joe Venne (as cited in Zeilig & Zeilig, 1987, p. 51)

Within this system of beliefs and values, the spiritual practices of Metis people varied (and still do). While the Metis have often been associated with Catholicism,

it should be noted that both European and First Nation forms of spirituality are a part of Metis culture. While wahkootowin guided people's behaviours, a form of folk Catholicism emerged as a central cultural institution and was enacted through the use of the sacraments that marked the life cycle. In the absence of clergy, the Metis baptized their own children, solemnized community marriages, buried their dead and held prayer services. After the priests arrived, the Metis sought educational opportunities for their children in church-run schools. As early as 1820, some Metis children attended boarding and day schools in Red River (now Winnipeg). Further west and north, in 1846 the Metis community of Ile a la Crosse (Saskatchewan) became home to the first Catholic boarding school outside of Manitoba. These early schools were entirely operated and funded by religious orders. While Metis parents wanted their children to attend school, they were unprepared for the residential school system created by the federal government in the latter half of the 19th century. Funded by the federal government and operated by churches, these schools served to further Canada's colonial agenda in assimilating Indigenous children by taking them away from their families and their culture.[7]

> There is no more unfortunate class in the country. … What is to keep them from becoming outcasts and menaces to society if they be not taken to Indian Schools, schools established and maintained, be it remembered, not for the mere purpose of fulfilling the conditions of Indian Treaties but in the interest of the commonwealth. - Indian Affairs, 1911 (as cited in Chartrand, Logan, & Daniels, 2006, p. 48).

The Metis also were observant of annual religious holidays such as Catholic feast days and Christmas and Easter, and many people made annual pilgrimages to places like Lac Ste. Anne (Alberta) or St. Laurent (Saskatchewan). To outsiders such pilgrimages may appear Christian, but their ongoing significance is rooted in Indigenous spiritual beliefs and traditions. For instance, Lac St. Anne was called Manito Sahkahigan (Spirit Lake) in Cree because of the water's powerful healing properties. Today, some Metis belong to a range of Christian denominations, some attend traditional ceremonies, and still others do both. Yet Metis people have their spiritual practices continually questioned by those who cannot comprehend the natural syncretism within their way of life.[8] Yet it was these ideas about being and belonging that nurtured individuals within the construct of broadly defined familial relationships.



[7] We do not know how many Metis children attended residential schools since like health statistics, the federal government did not maintain records on these students, but also because records have been closed. We have, nevertheless, a great deal of oral testimony from former Metis students from the 20th century. They suffered the same levels of cultural alienation and loss, sharing similar stories of abuse as First Nations people.

[8] Today people walk for miles in silent contemplation to St. Anne's shrine at Lac Ste. Anne where they camp for days attending mass, taking part in sunrise ceremonies, praying at the stations of the cross, and submerging themselves in the healing waters of the lake.



FOUNDATIONS OF METIS SOVEREIGNTY, SELF-DETERMINATION, AND GOVERNANCE

Independent Metis political thought and governance structures developed in the early 19th century as families advocated for themselves first within the fur trade and later in opposition to the colonial state. Between 1850 and 1885, the Metis were a concern to the emerging nation-state because Metis communities demanded recognition of their rights as self-determining and governing Indigenous people. One of the first times Metis people asserted their rights came during the negotiations for the Robinson-Huron and Robinson-Superior (1850) treaties, which were precipitated by the Mica Bay incident of 1849 when Metis and Anishinaabe men attacked a mine set up within their territory that was disrupting their way of life. Canada retaliated by first sending a military force and then agents to secure the extinguishment of land rights.

> The relations of the Indians and half-breeds have long been cordial; and in the negotiations as to these initial treaties, as in the subsequent ones, the claims of the half-breeds, to recognition, was urged by the Indians. - William Robinson, 1850 (as quoted in Morris, 1880, p. 19).

In this era, furthermore, Canada began to distinguish between "types" of Indigenous people by racializing populations that had structured themselves according to kinship networks. So, in 1850 Canada's representatives refused to negotiate with the Metis stating they would only treat with Indians because the Metis were too "white" (and therefore too civilized) to be Indigenous. For the Metis, Canada's narrative of Indigenous authenticity, increasingly reflected in legal and policy frameworks, heralded the unique struggle they would face within the colonial regime.

Canadian Confederation in 1867 made the acquisition and consolidation of land to facilitate the country's economic development and settlement imperative. As a result, Indigenous lands were surveyed and transformed into settler colonial spaces where the ability of Indigenous people to pursue their traditional economies was increasingly restricted and regulated. The



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LEGAL AND CULTURAL STEREOTYPES OF INDIGENOUS AUTHENTICITY

By the mid-19th century, Euro-Canadians began developing a deeply rooted animosity towards the Metis that continues to impact how they are perceived today and, in turn, Metis health and overall well-being. The Metis are still often portrayed in educational curricula as treasonous rebels because of their attempts to protect themselves at worst, or as *miscegenized* white people at best.[9] This has had negative consequences on the health of Metis individuals and communities as they struggle with systemic and institutional racism.

One of the most significant barriers for the Metis has been Canada's racialization of *Metisness* based on the Eurocentric notions about racial authenticity or purity. Canada is constructed on a series of legal principles that define who is (or is not) Indigenous that reflect a preoccupation with racial purity as the sole determinant of a person's Indigenousness.

> If they are Indians they go with the tribe; if they are half-breeds they are whites. - Sir John A. Macdonald, 1885.

Because Canadians generally regard the Metis as mixed-bloods, individuals with an admixture of white - primarily French - and Indian "blood," they can ignore that the Metis are an Indigenous nation. There is some obvious logic to the belief Metis are mixed-bloods because the word *Metis* itself means *mixed.* However, this definition in application to the Metis nation is, quite simply, a historical myth that ignores their peoplehood and fosters the stereotype that anyone with Indian blood is Metis and, therefore, Indigenous.

> ....I say, I'm Métis like it's an apology and he says, 'mmh,' like he forgives me, like he's got a big heart and mine's pumping diluted blood and his voice has sounded well-fed up till this point, but now it goes thin like he's across the room taking another look and when he returns he's got 'this look' that says he's leather and I'm naughahyde. - Marilyn Dumont (2015, p. 77).

[9] *Miscegenation* refers to the "inter-breeding" or sexual relationships of people considered to be of different racial types. In some countries, such as the United States, there were laws against miscegenation which criminalized interracial relationships. It is a term that has fallen into disuse in the late twentieth century.



THE FORGOTTEN PEOPLE

WAHKOOTOWIN MARGINALIZATION RESISTANCE TREASONOUS MIXED-BLOOD SOVEREIGNTY

Since the mid-20th century, the Metis have been a forgotten people partly because so few Canadians know who they are, but also because they became a jurisdictional football between federal and provincial governments, each denying responsibility for ensuring Metis access to basic services, particularly health and education, but also poverty reduction programs. Consequently, the Metis have struggled to maintain wahkootowin within an environment that has attacked the authenticity of their Indigeneity and restricted their ability to access resources and traditional lands. The direct result has been the separation of families first through diaspora and dislocation, and then through aggressive assimilationist policies that sought to dismantle the traditional Metis family. By the time modern scholars began studying them in the 20th century, at least two generations suffered from colonial policies that fostered their social, political, and economic marginalization.

> The great aim of our legislation has been to do away with the tribal system and assimilate the Indian people in all respects. - John A. Macdonald, 1887 (as cited in Dickason, 1997 pg. 230).

Outsiders have viewed Metis reliance on family and interfamilial relationships as a form of communalism that fostered behaviours that contributed to their collective poverty, lack of education, and poor health (Giraud, 1986). This overwhelmingly negative assessment of Metis family and society reflects the general belief that Indigenous people need to be saved from their cultural deficiencies which, in turn, justified the state's policies of assimilation. Social engineering projects to "rehabilitate" the rebellious and culturally bankrupt Metis were first promoted in the late 19th century by concerned clergy who sought the support of state officials as they created colonies. In 1895, the Catholic Church petitioned the federal government for aide in creating a Metis farm colony at St. Paul in central Alberta as the first in a series of French-speaking, Catholic enclaves in Western Canada. Here residents would be assimilated through Christian indoctrination and adoption of settled agricultural pursuits. To accomplish this, a residential industrial school that trained children to be labourers and domestics would be the cornerstone of Metis assimilation.

Despite the Church's intention, the Metis families at St. Paul des Métis resisted social engineering. While they were willing to farm, they refused to submit to having their worldview transformed by the manipulations of clergy (Huel, 1996; McLean, 1987). Growing resentful of Church interference in their lives, by 1900 the Metis accused the clergy of diverting funds for the farm colony



HOMELAND TRADITION RACIAL PURITY HALF-BREED ASSIMILATION SELF-DETERMINATION RACISM

to other missionization projects. The Church and government conversely blamed the Metis for failing to assimilate, claiming them to be "racially incapable" of adapting to a settled, agricultural way of life (Huel, 1996; McLean, 1987).[10] Yet at St. Paul des Métis and other places, the Metis did successfully adapt to farming even as they refused to fundamentally change who they were in the process. In a story that played out across Western Canada, within a decade of opening, the experiment was declared a failure and, in this case, French Canadian settlers were recruited to homestead on Metis lands.

Deliberate attempts by the state - often aided by clergy - to dislocate Metis from lands on which they lived and worked occurred steadily throughout the early 20th century. By the 1920s and 1930s, the majority of Metis were poor and living in isolated villages or on the edges of cities and towns including Winnipeg, Saskatoon, and Edmonton, among others. Across the historic homeland, several different types of communities emerged, shaping the different types of contexts Metis lived within throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. There were those accessible by roads or not; old villages that became municipalities like Ile a la Crosse and Lac La Biche; newer communities located on the fringe of reserves or white communities; those that had predominantly Metis populations and those that were mixed; northern and southern communities; communities that had mixed farm and hired labour economies; communities that hunted, fished, and trapped; and fully urbanized places (McLean, 1987). There are today, consequently, a broad range of 'traditional' Metis communities, but what they all shared was an enduring reliance on extensive familial relationships even as their economic opportunities became increasingly limited. For the Metis, their well-being and cultural safety has always been rooted in their extended family structures and grounded in their connection to lands they could no longer call theirs.

Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, the resolve of the state - Alberta and Saskatchewan - to fix the Metis intensified, who were by now regarded as a public health crisis and a real physical threat to the well-being of settlers. Yet, in this era there was no social welfare system to help the economically disadvantaged overcome poverty (Barron, 1997). In Saskatchewan in 1942, the case of a 13-year old Metis boy caught stealing food highlighted these issues. Authorities discovered that his community of Crescent Lake, comprised of itinerant labourers,

[10] The town retained its name, St. Paul des Métis, until the mid-1930s, although its transformation into a French Canadian agricultural colony happened nearly two decades earlier.

were squatting on Crown lands and living in makeshift shacks or tents. Poorly dressed and malnourished, many of the adults required medical treatment for conditions like trachoma, tuberculosis, and other communicable diseases. Although the Saskatchewan Department of Public Health was required to act, it had no immediate solution and it was unprepared to mobilize against general anti-Metis sentiment within the province. What they found, for instance, was that non-Indigenous parents refused to permit Metis children, who might be carrying communicable diseases, into local schools for fear their own children would be put at risk (Barron, 1997).

> That generation of my people was completely beaten. Their fathers had failed during the Rebellion to make a dream come true; they failed as farmers; now there was nothing left. Their way of life was a part of Canada's past and they saw no place in the world around them for they believed they had nothing to offer. They felt shame, and with shame the loss of pride and the strength to live each day. I hurt inside when I think of those people. - Maria Campbell (1973, p. 8)

By the end of the 1940s, in response to many stories such as this, the Saskatchewan government developed a social reform program of farm colonies to alleviate Metis poverty and attendant ill-health. Two experimental farms were created - one at Green Lake to the north and the other at Lebret in the south. Metis from southern Saskatchewan communities were encouraged to relocate to the farming colony in Green Lake, where 125 families



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were leased 40 acres of lots for 99 years, considerably less than the 160 acres deemed sufficient to establish a profitable homestead. In 1949, Metis families living in the community of Chicago Line (or Little Chicago) just outside of Lestock were loaded into cattle cars (along with their horses and carts) and sent north. The people of Chicago Line had been living on marginal lands covered in thick brush, sloughs, and muskeg, and working at seasonal, low-paying, manual labouring jobs. Their choice to leave Little Chicago reflected economic desperation, not a desire to leave their homes. As their train pulled away, they saw their homes burned behind them - an event repeated across Western Canada throughout the 1940s-60s and were only decommissioned when it was clear that they had failed as rehabilitation programs. The relentless assault on the Metis way of life in the late 20th century was emotionally debilitating for Metis families but nevertheless reflective of prevailing Eurocentric beliefs about social progress and the natural racial hierarchy.

> We were loading up there and we saw the smoke. That was Chicago - they were burning Chicago. There were some pretty good homes there. We didn't even leave Lestock and we saw a great big smoke. That was all them houses burnt. Now who the hell got paid to go and do that. I think it was the municipality. - Henry Pelletier (quoted in McLean, 1987, pp. 260-61).

A decade earlier, in response to similar stories, the Alberta government established the Ewing Commission to review the Metis situation. When the report was tabled in 1936, the Commission determined that Metis poverty and poor health were a direct result of their landlessness, which left them unable to compete equally for resources with white settlers.

Therefore, it concluded, the province had a moral responsibility to alleviate poverty (which would improve general health) in Metis communities by allocating land. This required identifying who the Metis were and so Alberta developed a definition that categorized them as non-treaty individuals with Indian blood "living the life of a half-breed," which, in turn, was defined as poor (Ens & Sawchuck, 2016, p. 271). Thus, the conditions for being Metis were underscored by a combination of racial and economic indicators, while Metis structures of nationhood and culture were ignored. The Commission's recommendation came to fruition in 1938 when twelve Alberta Métis settlements were created across north and central Alberta on 1.25 million acres of Crown land. The province was not acknowledging a Metis right to land or self-governance; the settlements were a social reform program and administered by the Métis Rehabilitation Branch of the Department of Public Welfare. However, although four of the settlements were decommissioned within a decade, today the remaining eight settlements comprise the only constitutionally protected Metis land-base in Canada.

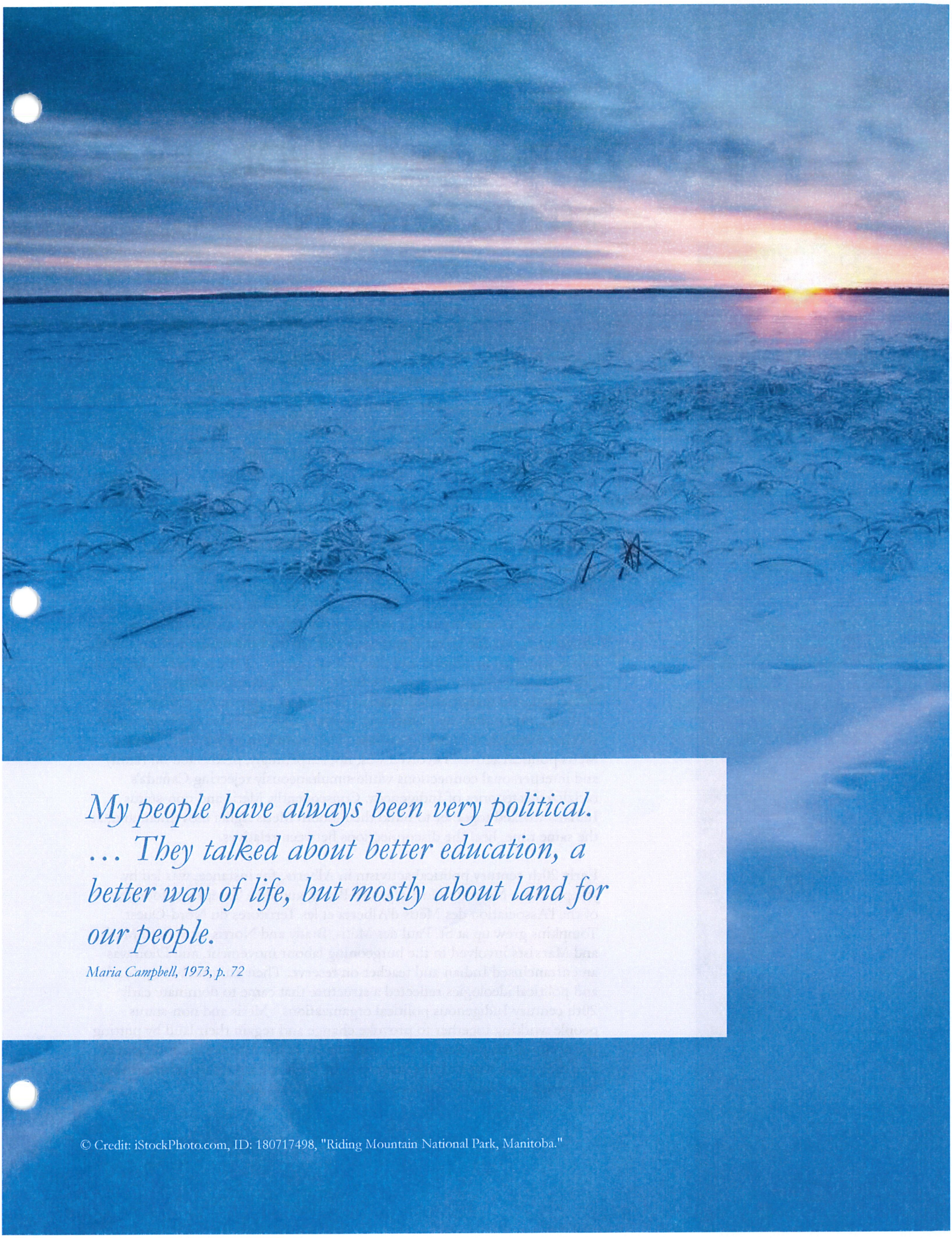
The state's concern with social reform or rehabilitation, instead of self-governance or Indigenous rights, ensured that its agents worked to undermine the traditional culture of Metis people as defined by familial connections. In the early 20th century, Indigenous children were frequently removed from their homes by state agents and given over to the care of religious orders which operated the residential schools (Métis Nation of Alberta, 2004). The impact of being disconnected from their families and traditions has left many residential school survivors with a profound sense of loss that has negatively impacted their physical, emotional, spiritual, and mental health (Allan & Smylie, 2015). This is compounded today by the refusal of the state to acknowledge that they had been students.[11] By the 1950s and 1960s, with the closure of many of these church-run facilities and the creation of Canada's welfare system, provincial social workers seized Metis children who were then either fostered or adopted out of their families and communities. This era, known widely as the "era of the black car" or the Sixties Scoop, replaced one form of child apprehension by the state with another. Furthermore, child apprehension continues today, with conservative estimates suggesting that three times as many Indigenous children are in state care than ever attended residential schools. The attack on the Indigenous family is rooted in a colonial belief that the Indigenous family structure was culturally flawed, unhealthy, and socio-economically damaging to everyone, but especially children. Today, the justification for such apprehensions is framed as being "in the best interests of the child," but the underlying ideology has not changed much since the days of residential schools.

By the early 20th century, the Metis were landless and dispersed, and families struggled to remain together and nurture the social supports that had kept them healthy for generations. Despite the range of obstacles brought on by colonization, Metis communities have demonstrated profound resilience by continuing to assert their social, cultural, economic and political independence.[12] These uninvited changes became the impetus for current Metis resistance movements aimed at protecting their rights and nurturing their health and well-being.

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[11] The Metis were left out of the formal residential school apology and significantly, the school at Ile a la Crosse was officially declared by the Conservative government to not be an "actual" residential school because it was funded by the Catholic Church rather than the federal government. Instead, according to the Conservative government, the Ile a la Crosse school would be designated as a "boarding school," an act that had the effect of preventing any former students from filing compensation claims. Conversely, the school at Beauval, Saskatchewan, a half hour drive south of Ile a la Crosse, was, according to that same government, considered a residential school and its former students were entitled to be compensated for their pain and suffering. The decision of the federal government was a bitter blow to all former students from across the north. In 2015, the Liberal government under Justin Trudeau agreed to review the decision of the previous administration. It is too early to tell what the outcome will be; however, the old school building in Ile a la Crosse will be torn down in 2017.

[12] The notion that the Metis were an independent people has been well articulated in Canadian and American historical literature. See for instance Devine (2004), *The people who own themselves: Aboriginal ethnogenesis in a Canadian family, 1600-1900*; Payment (1990), *The free people - Otipemisiwak": Batoche, Saskatchewan, 1870-1930*; Macdougall (2010), *One of the family: Métis culture in nineteenth century northwestern Saskatchewan*; Foster (1994, 2001), "Wintering, the outsider adult male and the ethnogenesis of the Western Plains Metis;" Ens (1996), *Homeland to hinterland: The changing worlds of the Red River Metis in the nineteenth century*; and Foster (1986), "The Plains Metis."



My people have always been very political. … They talked about better education, a better way of life, but mostly about land for our people.

Maria Campbell, 1973, p. 72

© Credit: iStockPhoto.com, ID: 180717498, "Riding Mountain National Park, Manitoba."



THE CONTEMPORARY MÉTIS NATION

> My people have always been very political. … They talked about better education, a better way of life, but mostly about land for our people. - Maria Campbell (1973, p. 72).

The Metis were not silenced as colonial policies and laws marginalized them. Despite their defeat in 1885, the Metis nurtured new generations of political leadership and created organizations to represent them at all levels of government. In 1887, St. Vital (now in Winnipeg) founded l'Union Nationale Métis Saint-Joseph du Manitoba (UNMSJM) to defend Metis rights (Payment, 2009; Weinstein, 2007). At about the same time, the people at St. Paul des Métis were politically active, pushing forward a rights-based agenda. However, it was the Great Depression that sparked the modern Metis rights movement, first in Alberta and then across the rest of the historic homeland. This political activism became the focal point for disenfranchised, dislocated, and marginalized families seeking to improve the circumstances of their communities by advocating for their rights but also the basic social services available to other Canadians. The manner in which 20th century Metis political activism evolved was, not surprisingly, predicated on family and interpersonal connections while simultaneously rejecting Canada's racialized categories of Indigeneity. Consequently, Metis and non-status Indians worked together to build the modern Metis rights movement and, at the same time, heal the disconnections between relatives.

Early 20th century political activism in Alberta, for instance, was led by Joseph Dion, Malcolm Norris, James Brady, and Pete Tompkins, founders of the l'Association des Métis d'Alberta et les Territores du Nord-Ouest. Tompkins grew up at St. Paul des Métis, Brady and Norris were both Metis and Marxists involved in the burgeoning labour movement, and Dion was an enfranchised Indian and teacher on reserve. Their cultural backgrounds and political ideologies reflected a structure that came to dominate early 20th century Indigenous political organizations - Metis and non-status people working together to provoke change and regain their land by putting the needs of the poorest in their community at the fore. At the forefront of this movement was a clear recognition of the historic kinship relationships between First Nations (status and non-status) and Metis.

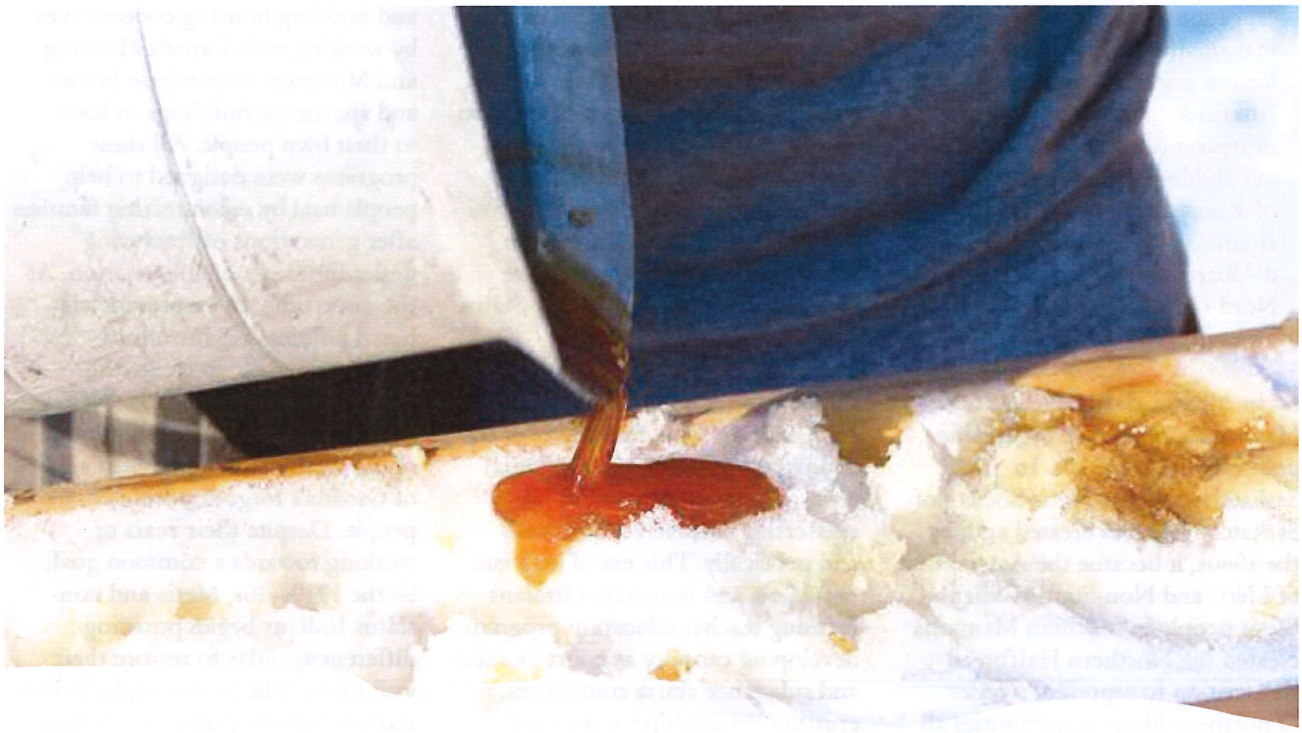
> Our First Objective … is to see that adequate provision is made for our homeless and destitute families…to see that proper provision is made for education of our children [and] also provision of a better system of medical attention. - l'Association des Métis d'Alberta et les Territores du Nord-Ouest, 1932 (as cited in Dobbin, 1981, p. 63)

As in Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba, Metis were organizing politically in the 1930s. In Saskatchewan, the Métis Society of Saskatchewan was created and, by the 1960s, it became the Association of Métis and Non-Status Indians. Metis people in northern Manitoba created the Northern Halfbreed Association to represent a series of northern Metis communities all focused on gaining title to their settlements (something that never happened). It was another 30 years before similar organizations and political activity emerged in Ontario and British Columbia, with the Ontario Métis and Non-Status Indian Association (OMNSIA) and Lake Nipigon Métis Association forming, along with the British Columbia Association of non-Status Indians.

By the late 1960s and early 1970s, Indigenous people from all over the country were challenging colonial laws, policies, and attitudes by reasserting themselves culturally and politically. This era of activism saw Metis and non-status Indians forming teacher education programs, developing capacity as court workers and substance abuse councillors, creating Friendship Centres with other urban Indigenous people, and building housing cooperatives by working with Canada Housing and Mortgage to purchase homes and apartment buildings to lease to their own people. All these programs were designed to help people heal by reconnecting families after generations of fracturing under the stress of colonization. At the same time, these provincially-based political organizations united nationally to create the Native Council of Canada (NCC) to lobby federally for recognition of the distinct and inherent rights of Canada's forgotten Indigenous people. Despite their years of working towards a common goal, by the 1970s-80s, Metis and non-status Indians began pursuing different agendas to restore their well-being. The latter sought Indian status while the former continued building a rights-based agenda



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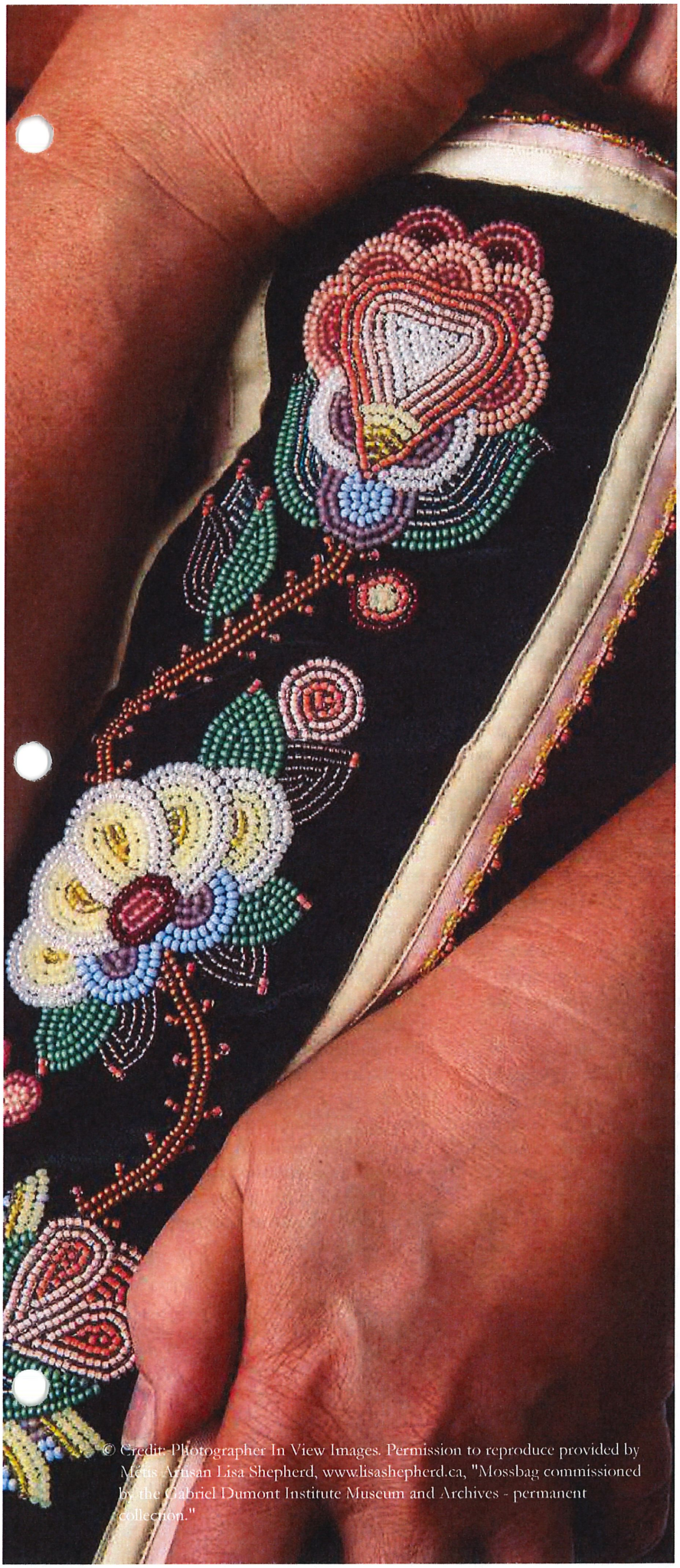


© Credit: iStockPhoto.com, ID: 97491638, "Making maple taffy."

based on their distinct identity and history, believing their goal of self-determination rested in their distinctness and that this was the only way to be strong and healthy.

Through such efforts, the Metis were recognized in section 35 of the *Constitution Act* (1982), which identifies the three Aboriginal peoples of Canada and affirms their existing Aboriginal and treaty rights. Inclusion in the *Constitution Act* affirmed the Métis' place within Canada as a distinct Indigenous people with rights they always knew they possessed. Within a year of this political victory, and the subsequent passing of Bill C-31 which reinstated the Indian status of thousands of women and their children, the Metis and non-status organizations formally dissolved. The Métis National Council (MNC) emerged and the NCC was renamed the Congress of Aboriginal People (CAP), claiming as its constituency off-reserve populations. Métis people are now represented at the federal level by the MNC, which represents five provincial governing bodies across the Métis homeland: the Métis Nation British Columbia, Métis Nation of Alberta, Métis Nation Saskatchewan, Manitoba Métis Federation, and the Métis Nation of Ontario. Together, these representative bodies pursue rights-based political agendas centred on land claims, hunting and fishing rights, and self-determination via the courts, with several cases reaching the Supreme Court of Canada (SCC). They are also the political bodies that advocate for the development of health and wellness programs that are Metis specific while also building research capacity by collaborating with health and education scholars.

As the twenty-first century was ushered in, the Metis have developed a renewed hope that the future will be better. This sentiment has been bolstered by several recent decisions by the Supreme Court of Canada that have validated who they are. In 1981, the Manitoba Métis Federation (MFF) launched a court case, *Manitoba Métis Federation Inc., et al. v. Attorney General of Canada, et al.*, asserting that Canada did not fulfill its constitutional obligations agreed upon in the Manitoba Act, 1870. The MMF argued that that there was an inexcusable delay in implementing the original promises intended to protect their land rights. In a 6-2 ruling in favour of the



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MMF, handed down on the 8 March 2013, the SCC concluded that the federal government "acted with persistent inattention and failed to act diligently," and that it "could and should have done better." The MMF did not seek any specified damages and the SCC offered no remedies, so the impact of this case has yet to be seen; however, the Métis of Manitoba and elsewhere view the ruling as a vindication of their history and their rights, and as a first step on the path to reconciliation for the Metis.

One of the greatest accomplishments thus far has been the SCC's 2003 *Powley* decision that declared "members of the Métis community in and around Sault Ste. Marie have, under s. 35(1) of the *Constitution Act*, 1982, an Aboriginal right to hunt for food." This right, according to the SCC, was "infringed on without justification by the Ontario hunting legislation." The *Powley* decision was also significant because it was the first time that a legal definition disassociated Metisness from race by concluding that the term *Metis* did not include "all individuals with mixed First Nations and European heritage; [but] it refers to distinctive peoples who, in addition to their mixed ancestry, developed their own customs and recognizable group identity separate from their First Nations or Inuit and European forebears. A Métis community is a group … with a distinctive collective identity, living together in the same geographical area and sharing a common way of life." This ruling confirms in law how the Metis always understood themselves and, therefore, is a significant advancement for Canada.

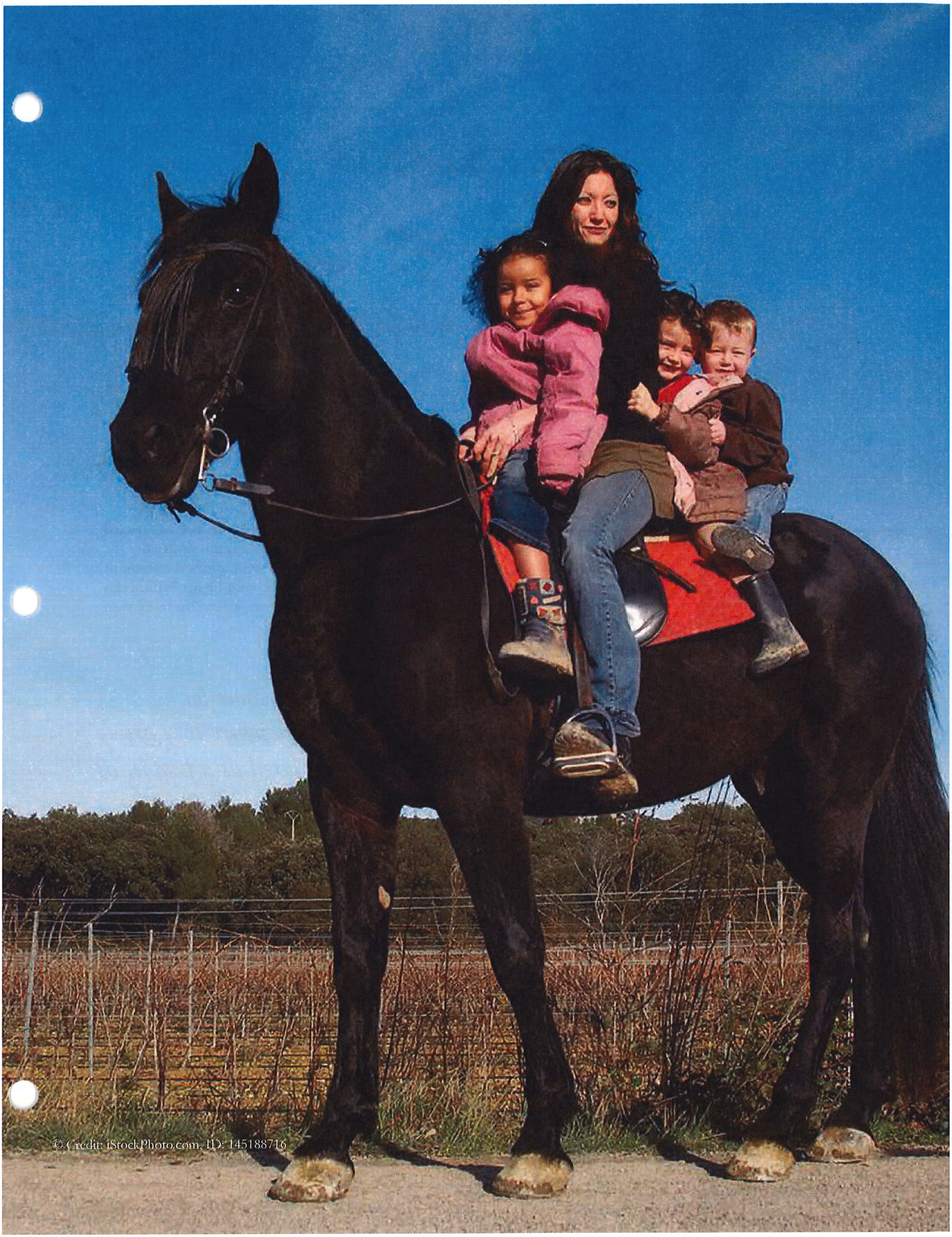


© Credit: iStockPhoto.com, ID: 114381098, "Sault Ste. Marie."

Finally, on 14 April 2016 in the case of *Daniels v. Canada*, the SCC affirmed that the term "Indian" in s. 91(24) of the *Constitution Act* (1867) includes Metis and non-status Indians. In 1999, Harry Daniels (then the president of CAP), launched a lawsuit against the federal government, arguing the term "Indian" in the 1867 Act meant "Aboriginal" according to today's terminology. This ruling in favour of Metis and non-status Indians resolved the substantive issue of federal jurisdictional responsibility, which had been contested since Confederation. While this ruling did not truly break new ground in Canadian law - the Inuit were declared to be "Indians" in 1939 - it effectively reconciled s. 91(24) with s. 35 of the *Constitution Act* (1982).[13] The ruling does not confer "status" on the Metis - they will not be included within the governance structure of the *Indian Act* and there is no attached federal fiduciary responsibility - but the ruling corrects a historical error that significantly impacted the Metis and left them as forgotten people.

These cases are significant for bringing attention and power to Metis political organizations, but political bodies are only as strong as the people they represent. The effectiveness of these organizations rests with their constituents, whose sense of self comes from knowing their history and, therefore, their cultural worldview. The Metis have a long way to go in terms of economic and educational parity with other Canadians, but these rulings represent a new hope for their health, well-being, and cultural safety. Things are, however, not perfect - assimilative policies undermined traditional social and cultural structures and disadvantaged Metis people in terms of obtaining higher education and finding employment. For the approximately 67% of Metis living in urban centres, it can be difficult to connect with other Metis people in traditional contexts and even harder to confront both scepticism about their authenticity as Indigenous people let alone outright racism. Yet, despite these lingering threats to their health, Metis communities have demonstrated profound resilience by continuing to assert their right to social and cultural security and well-being, as well as economic and political independence.

[13] SCC, R v. *Eskimo* [1939] S.C.R. 104 determined that the term "Indian" included the "Eskimo" (now Inuit).


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CONCLUSION

While the impacts of colonization continue to have negative effects on Metis health and well-being, Metis individuals and communities are working diligently to re-establish and strengthen their connections to each other and to the land. Wahkootowin not only represents shared responsibilities and social obligations to one another, but also works to ensure that the shared history of a people is remembered and passed on to future generations. In this way, Metis people have continued to tell the stories of their communities, even after having been removed from traditional lands or ending up in cities outside their homeland. Having been subjected to economic, social, political and cultural inequities, it is the stories of previous generations that continue to give Metis communities the strength and ability to regain traditional forms of health and well-being. Within this contemporary political, economic, and social context, it remains to be seen whether wahkootowin can or will be repaired.

I think the end goal is a healthy space for Aboriginal people in this society where they are recognized, respected and honoured as a people, as the founding peoples of this country. And where there are opportunities for them to grow and become productive, healthy, participating members of society.

Jean Teillet, Metis lawyer (2014).

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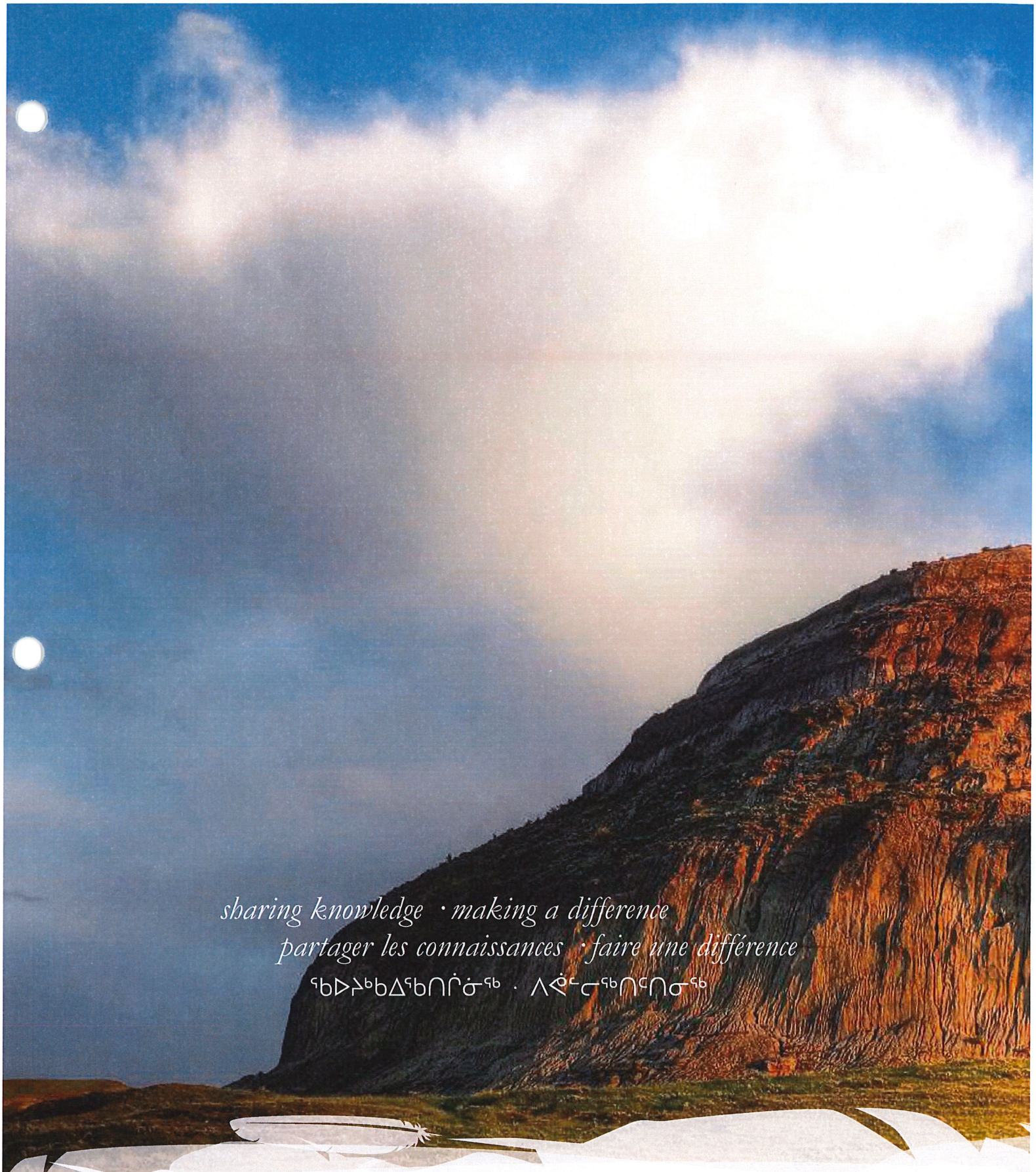
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