ART AND INDIGENOUS HEALTH AND WELL-BEING: *Art as a means for truth and thrivance*

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National Collaborating Centre for Indigenous Health
Centre de collaboration nationale de la santé autochtone

INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE(S) AND PUBLIC HEALTH

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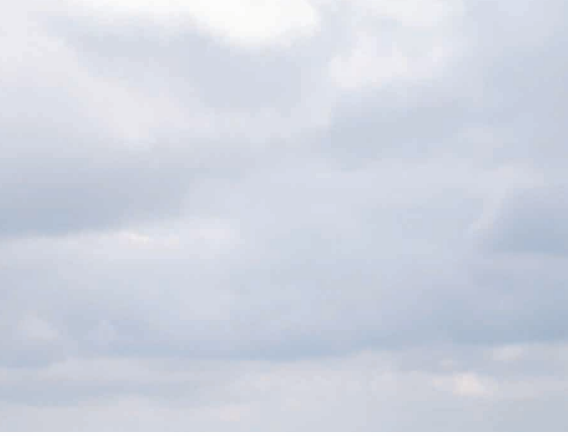

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INTRODUCTION

First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people have always known and embraced the linkages between the arts and well-being (Crawford et al., 2020; Steinhauer & Lamouche, 2018). The National Collaborating Centre for Indigenous Health (NCCIH) has been working since 2012 to document the vibrant interface of art and Indigenous health (de Leeuw & Greenwood, 2012; Muirhead & de Leeuw, 2012). The result is a series of reports, starting with this historical perspective on the impacts of colonialism on Indigenous Peoples[1] and how art provides a means of *thrivance*. A portmanteau of "thriving and resistance," anthropologist Dianne F. Baumann (2023), from the Blackfeet Nation, explains that thrivance "accentuates the importance of ancestral homelands and traditional practices to healing and a positive sense of Indigenous identity and dignity" (p. 1). Thrivance builds off of the concept of *survivance,* a portmanteau of "survival and resistance" coined by Anishinaabe scholar Gerald Vizenor (2019) that asserts the continued presence of Indigenous Peoples and cultures despite colonial attempts for assimilation. Beyond survivance, thrivance also suggests healing, well-being, and "living in a good way for future ancestors" (Johnson-Jennings & Jennings, 2023, p. 117).

The purpose of this report is to demonstrate how the arts both express and enact resistances to colonialism and thus open pathways for Indigenous thrivance. To do this, we focus on artists who redress prominent colonial acts and policies, such as:

- the Doctrine of Discovery,
- the *Indian Act*,
- Residential Schools,
- Indian Hospitals,
- resource extraction, and
- the Massey Report.

[1] The term 'Indigenous Peoples' is used throughout this report to refer to First Nations peoples, Inuit, and Métis peoples collectively, and is capitalized as a sign of respect for the distinct First Nations, Inuit, and Métis societies. Wherever relevant, the terms "First Nations," "Inuit," and "Métis" will be used when referring to specific Indigenous populations.

Indigenous artists (which includes a wide and diverse set of creative people from writers to painters, from musicians to chefs, from movie directors and actors to playwrights and poets) contribute to thrivance in three main ways:

- by celebrating strength,
- by speaking back to systems of oppression that continue to impact health and well-being, and
- by educating non-Indigenous settlers and other Indigenous persons about violent colonial histories.

Art provides critical entrypoints for visualizing and materializing colonial injustices so that they may become discernable to others. Creating this artwork also enacts new ways forward. Artists today take up the policies, documents, and structures of the past and transform them with what artist and art theorist Lianne Marie Leda Charlie (Tagé Cho Hudän, Northern Tutchone-speaking people of the Yukon) calls "Indigenous aesthetics" (2021, p. 26). Indigenous aesthetics reveal the "complexities and intimacies of contemporary Indigenous politics and enact alternatives to dominate governance systems" (Charlie, 2021, p. 26). Creating artwork in this context is not simply representing historical and contemporary injustices rooted in colonialism, they are lifeways for vibrant futurities. The arts capture

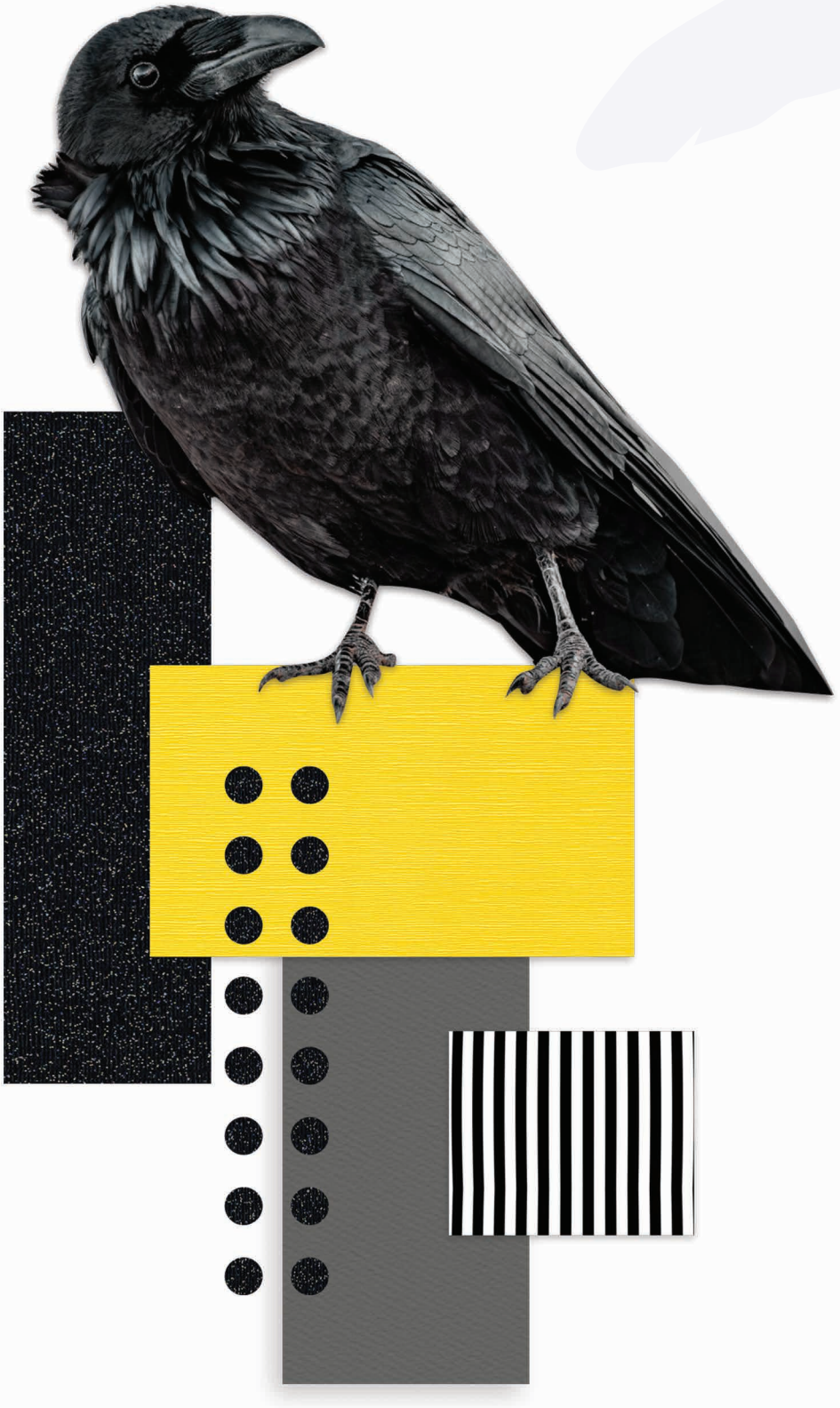


FIGURE 1. LISA BOIVIN, "OUR WEIRD RAVEN," PART 1, DIGITAL COLLAGE, 2024.

Image courtesy of artist Lisa Boivin.

the throughlines of colonization in ways that promote truth and reconciliation, vitalize artistic practices for well-being, and perform Indigenous knowledges that actively contribute to nation building.

Take for example the artwork, "Our Weird Raven" (2024), by co-author Lisa Boivin (member of the Deninu Kue First Nation) (Figure 1). The collage of geometric shapes and central Raven figure provide insight into the oral traditions, colonized history, and futurity of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples. Raven is an iconic figure for most Indigenous Peoples of so-called Canada, often taking the characterization of trickster, shapeshifter, and adventurer (Bouchard et al., 2012; Meyok & Cutler, 2023; Vickers & Budd, 2013). Ravens use their unparalleled intelligence and artful wiles in order to thrive in any number of ecologies and to the vast changes to their environments since the arrival of settlers to Turtle Island.[2] Overall, Raven is a survivor. "Our Weird Raven" is thus emblematic of larger themes of adaptation, resurgence, and thriving of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples. The raven postures towards the past but looks up and to the future.

Boivin's work exemplifies Indigenous aesthetics and collage theory as a way of representing the philosophical divides between First Nations, Inuit, and Métis relationships with the land as opposed to those of the colonial State (Charlie, 2016; Charlie, 2017; Charlie 2021). While collage seeks to generate meaning through the placement and arrangement of divergent visual elements, Indigenous collage theory is specifically contextualized within the "fragmented realities of Indigenous identities, families, communities, cultures, and lands that have been created (sometimes violently, always intentionally) by historical and contemporary colonialism" (Charlie, 2016, p. iiv). Boivin alludes to settler-colonialism in the art deco to mid-century modern design of shapes and patterns beneath Raven, a time when Canada's attempted cultural genocide of Indigenous Peoples through residential schools and the '60s Scoop[3] policies were in full force. The bars below Raven may connote imprisonment or capture, which Raven has skillfully evaded. The visual allusion to western skyscraper architecture may also refer to an exploitative relationship with the land and air, where Raven's path is disrupted and fragmented. In the totemic structure of blocks and bird, the work taken as a whole recalls an overcoming of these colonial traumas, as Raven is positioned above cage bars and ready to reclaim the freedom of flight.

Ensuring the vibrant presence of Indigeneity now and into the future of the broader Canadian artistic landscape is one way for First Nations, Inuit,

The arts capture the throughlines of colonization in ways that promote truth and reconciliation, vitalize artistic practices for well-being, and perform Indigenous knowledges that actively contribute to nation building.

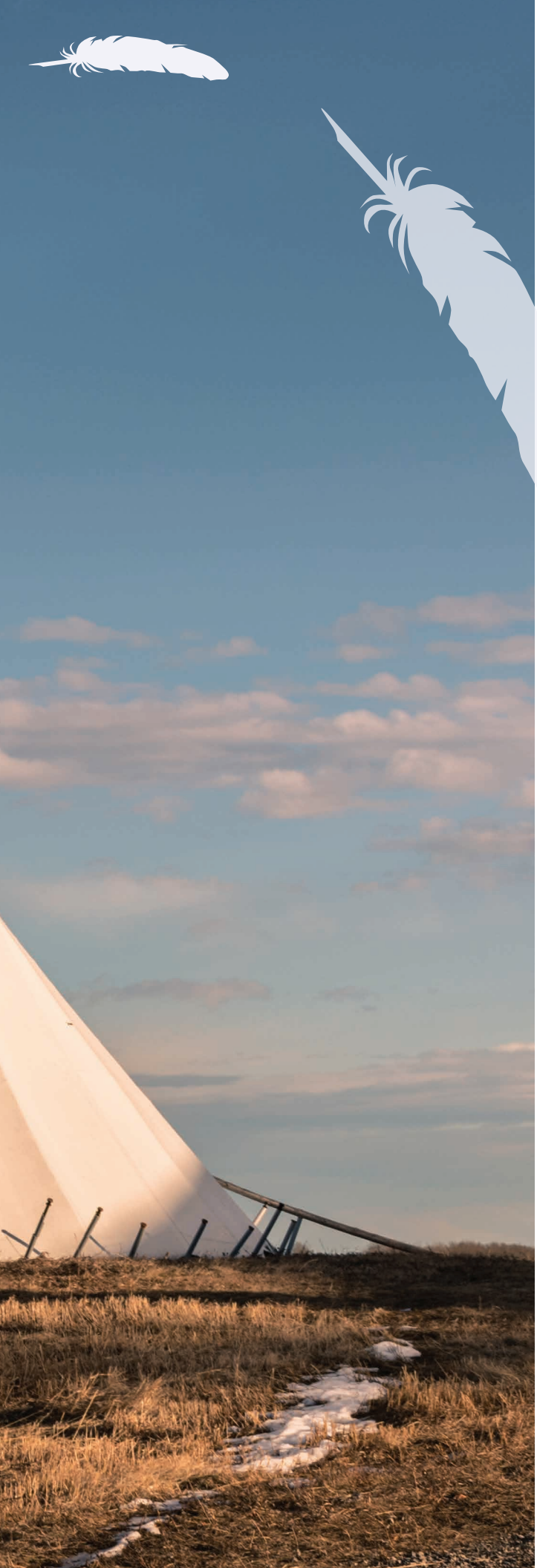
[2] Turtle Island is the name many Indigenous Peoples use to refer to the content of North America.

[3] The '60s Scoop refers to an era during which Indigenous children were removed in large numbers from their families and communities and placed in the care of non-Indigenous foster or adoptive parents (Aboriginal Legal Aid in BC, 2025). This practice was especially pronounced in the 1960s but started as early as the late 1950s and continued until the early 1980s.

and Métis peoples to claim "visual sovereignty." Visual sovereignty "asserts self-determination and self-representation, often through artistic praxis" (Mamers, 2024, p. 14). It highlights Indigenous perspectives about specific historical, political, and legal positions. The concept also identifies the potential for artistic practices to realize ideals of nationhood and resurgence. Indigenous musicians, visual artists, writers, actors, and other creative people have long harnessed aesthetics to share knowledges with one another and educate non-Indigenous people about historical and contemporary injustices. Creative practices can reveal how historical traumas ripple into contemporary determinants of Indigenous health. These include:

- expressions of culture,
- mental health,
- community connections,
- economic participation,
- self-determination, and more (Gray, 2017; Isaac, 2022; Mamers, 2024).

Concepts of thrivance, Indigenous aesthetics, collage theory, and visual sovereignty help us verbalize the power of artworks that hold a critical mirror up to colonial policies like the Doctrine of Discovery, the *Indian Act*, Residential Schools, Indian Hospitals, resource extraction, and the Massey Report. Each of these structures sought to eradicate or subsume First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples and cultures. Although innumerable policies have resulted in injustices large and small against all Indigenous Peoples of Turtle Island, these policies in particular have prompted artistic attention for their splintering effects on health and daily life. By creatively taking on these policies through art, Indigenous Peoples claim the visual (and musical, vocal, written, etc.) sovereignty to tell their own histories in the face of persistent oppression. This truth promotes healing and new possibilities for thriving.



DOCTRINE OF DISCOVERY

Prior to first contact, oral histories suggest the First Nations of Turtle Island enjoyed good health (Reading & Wien, 2013). This was characterized by active lifestyles, healthy diets, and a practice of fostering wholistic well-being by connecting "health, food, work, culture, family and community" (First Nations Health Council, 2011, p. 7). The arts have always been a way to express and generate such well-being. Whether they be visual, spoken, sung, drummed, or danced, the arts can enact medicines, shape relationships, and forge or re-forge cultural knowledges (Ansloos et al., 2022; Belcourt, 2010; France, 2020). The Doctrine of Discovery, which laid the legal groundwork for colonization, would forever change the health and well-being of the peoples residing on Turtle Island since time immemorial.

Sho Sho Belelige Esquiro, an artist of Kaska Dena, Cree, and Scottish ancestry, evokes the Doctrine of Discovery in her 2021 fashion line "Sho Sho Esquiro: Doctrine of Discovery." Her clothing line incorporates materials like moose hide, shells, and porcupine quills gathered in the Yukon to create contemporary couture designs. In addition to the ancestral knowledges imbued in the natural materials, these works of wearable art also include bold English phrases that speak directly to settlers, highlighting atrocities conducted against Indigenous Peoples over the past centuries. Examples include, "They stole the children from the land now they steal the land from the children," and "Kill the Indian, save the man," scrawled backwards across the front of a dress. It is as if Esquiro asks us to take a critical look in the mirror and recognize how these assimilationist mantras violently contribute

to colonization. The backwards phrases are then offset by numerous citations sewn onto patches adorning the clothing: "Anishinaabe 1996," "Oka 1990," and "Six Nations 2006." The patches invite the uninitiated to educate themselves about the references to Indigenous land sovereignty court cases and protests. For example, "Six Nations 2006" refers to the court filing by the Six Nations Confederacy against the Canadian government for infringing upon the Two Row Wampum Belt agreement (Six Nations of the Grand River, 2019).

Wampum belts of the Hodinöhsö:ni (or Haudenosaunee, "People of the Longhouse") are meticulously woven bands of beads honed from quahog clam and lightening whelk shells. The crafting of the belts and the beadings that form them mnemonically enshrine messages and treaties between peoples (Jemison et al., 2022). The Ha:yëwënta' Wampum Belt, or Hiawatha Belt, immortalized the end of war and pledged a new friendship between the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, and Seneca Nations to form the Five Nation Confederacy. The Tuscarora Nation joined the Confederacy in 1722, and it is now referred to as the Six Nations Confederacy. Wampum belts created since time immemorial by Hodinöhsö:ni peoples demonstrate the profound significance of the arts as a conduit of oral histories, as a means to maintain cultural protocols, and as a way of marking momentous events (Ansloos et al., 2022). This belt remains a powerful artwork, as its image is emblazoned across the Six Nations Confederacy flag to symbolize Hodinöhsö:ni sovereignty.

European colonial settlers operated according to their own tenets that, to them, superseded any pre-existing land agreements. In 1493, the Doctrine of Discovery decreed that European explorers during the Age of Discovery (approximately from the 15th through 17th centuries) could claim any *terra nullius* (unoccupied lands) for their own sovereign nation (Miller et al., 2010; O'Toole et al., 2022; Smith & Waters, 2022). If the land was already occupied, the European nation had the right to claim the land by conquest or cession.

The motivation for the Doctrine was to take ownership over resources and trade routes around the world and to spread the Christian faith. Although hundreds of self-determining Nations already lived across Turtle Island – and had since time immemorial – the lands now known as The Americas were considered terra nullius because Indigenous Peoples were deemed insufficiently "civilized" (i.e., White and Christian) to be counted as sovereign nations. The great myth of terra nullius is the foundation of what is now called Canada wherein, at many systemic levels across health, education, government, and law jurisdictions, settlers

are positioned as inherently superior to Indigenous Peoples. The underlying ideas of the Doctrine influenced numerous acts and laws that continue to oppress Indigenous culture and sovereignty.

Wampum belts were also created to enshrine Hodinöhsö:ni and colonist land treaties, such as the Two Row Wampum Belt made as a covenant between the Six Nations Confederacy and Dutch settlers for land rights along the Grand River in Ontario (Six Nations of the Grand River, 2019). However, colonists have failed to respect the significance of these arts and the promises woven therein (Jemison et al., 2022). In 2006, protestors for the Six Nations occupied a residential development site along the Grand River that was improperly sold by the Crown. The reference to this protest is now emblazoned on Esquiro's activist fashion line. For the Hodinöhsö:ni, wampum belts transcend a mere materiality of an art object. Wampum belts upheld social protocols and defined socioculture and political ways of knowing and being. Other Indigenous Peoples across Turtle Island attributed similar significance to their own artistic traditions.

The arts, as materialized in wampum belts, are pivotal threads in the interwoven facets of wholistic health that bind together kinship, community, relationships to the land, and cultural pride (Ansloos et al., 2022). Participation in culture, which includes the arts, is widely identitfied as a determinant of Indigenous health (Chandler & Dunlop, 2018; Currie et al., 2013; First Nations Health Council, 2011; de Leeuw & Greenwood, 2012). The arts not only transmit knowledges essential to pride and identity, they also act as rallying points to uphold treaty rights and Indigenous sovereignty movements today.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada's Call to Action #39 demands that settlers "repudiate concepts used to justify European sovereignty over Indigenous lands and peoples such as the Doctrine of Discovery and *terra nullius*" (TRC, 2015a). Esquiro's fashion designs enact Indigenous aesthetics that critically intervene on these colonial concepts by claiming visual sovereignty. The bold text and eye-catching, uniquely Native designs can hardly go unnoticed. Esquiro wants her fashions to be everyday wear that prompt passersby to scrutinize the consequences of the Doctrine of Discovery, which are rarely taught from Indigenous perspectives. Esquiro's couture embodies the ability of art to weave together living histories with the continuous activism of Indigenous Peoples to reclaim their rights over ancestral lands, promote self-determination, and carve paths to well-being (Ansloos et al., 2022; Belarde-Lewis, 2021).

THE *INDIAN ACT*

The *Indian Act* was signed into colonial law in 1876. The intent of the *Act* was to define, control, and assimilate Indigenous Peoples in Canada (de Leeuw et al., 2022). The *Act* made every effort to eradicate Indigenous culture, including amendments between 1884 and 1951 that outlawed expressions of Indigenous governance, culture, and spirituality. These included potlatches for West Coast Nations, Sun Dance ceremonies for Prairie Nations, and then dancing entirely in 1925 (The Canadian Encyclopedia, n.d.; TRC, 2015a). As Kwakwaka'wakw contemporary dancer Rayn Cook-Thomas explains, dances are not simply an art form for his people, but "were made to be life" and a way "of breathing life into the stories [he's] telling and the ways [he's] moving" (Cook-Thomas, as quoted in Hull, 2022, p. 27). Dancer, choreographer, and actor Byron Chief-Moon (member of the Blackfoot Confederacy) further relays how dancers become conduits for communicating with the natural and supernatural worlds, as "nature speaking to [his] senses allows the territory to intercommunicate while [he] dance[s]" (Chief-Moon, as quoted in Hull, 2022, p. 29). Dancing is therefore a gestural and spatial enactment of Indigenous aesthetics, as it represents "culturally rooted practices of making and creating that are in relationship with and connected to Creation" (Charlie, 2021, p.26).

Via The *Indian Act,* the colonial Canadian government targeted dancing as a strategy to weaken Indigenous ways of life, sever relationships with ancestral lands, and force assimilation into colonial Canadian society. *Indian Act* policies are now understood as part of Canada's attempted cultural genocide of Indigenous Peoples. The United Nations defined genocide in 1948, and scholars have since nuanced this concept to include "cultural genocide," or the "forced assimilation, attempted destruction of traditional cultures, and denial of Indigenous identities" (Loppie et al., 2014, p. 10).

Art uplifts and strengthens community bonds by reifying shared values and knowledge systems (Ansloos et al., 2022; France, 2020; Gray, 2017; Isaac, 2022). Indigenous Peoples use storytelling and ceremonies involving dance, song, and visual expression to pass along political, sociocultural, and kinship knowledge. Therefore, banning cultural expressions was a conscious colonial effort to sever key methods of intergenerational teaching (Belcourt, 2010). However, because First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples are strong and resilient, language, arts, and spiritual practices continued in the face of systemic oppression.

The arts are one means by which First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples have refused attempts at

Art uplifts and strengthens community bonds by reifying shared values and knowledge systems

(Ansloos et al., 2022; France, 2020; Gray, 2017; Isaac, 2022)

cultural genocide. "Generative refusal," as Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg and a member of the Alderville First Nation) explains, applies "Indigenous ethics, theory, and politics" in refusals to abide by settler-colonial laws aimed at eroding Indigenous social and land rights (2018, n.p.). In doing so, these refusals also generate "different worlds – worlds that centre the material and spiritual needs of the community" (Simpson, 2018, n.p.). Indigenous Peoples continued to strengthen and practice cultural arts and spiritual ceremonies despite the *Indian Act's* effort to eradicate stories, expressions, ceremonies, and choreographies (France, 2020). Indigenous strength and resilience through activism, the courts, and everyday acts of generative refusal eventually overturned the laws against cultural expressions like dance in 1951 (Dowdie, 2022).

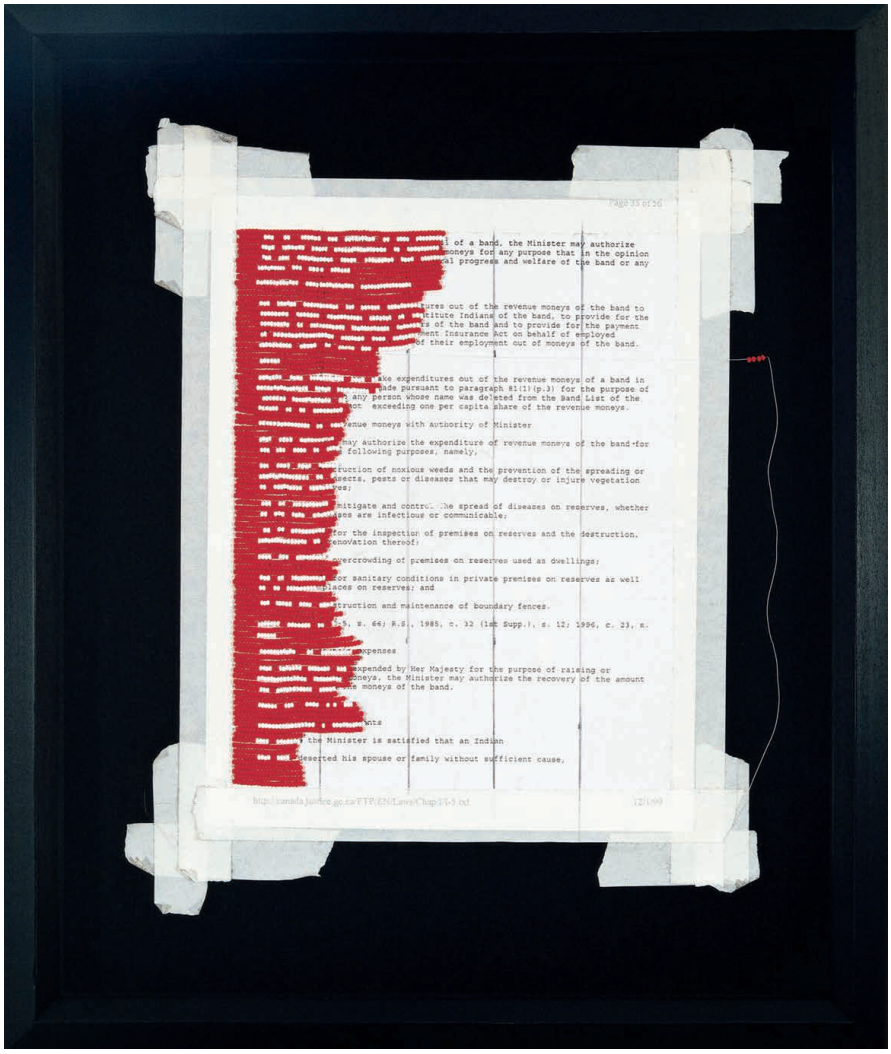


FIGURE 2. NADIA MYRE, "INDIAN ACT," GLASS BEADS, STROUD CLOTH, INDIAN ACT (R.S., C 1-5. 1985), 2000-2002.

Image courtesy of artist Nadia Myre.

Contemporary Indigenous dancers grapple with the legacies of the *Indian Act* in their work, remembering its impact on their own communities and making efforts to educate non-Indigenous settlers who may not fully know this history, particularly from Indigenous perspectives. For his part, Cook-Thomas seeks to share certain dances with non-Indigenous witnesses (audiences). He does so with permission from his community to foster "respect for the story being told and how it will be received" (Cook-Thomas, as quoted in Hull, 2022, p. 27). Art in this context enacts visual sovereignty, as it claims the gestural and kinesthetic space to speak back against oppressive systems and promote reconciliation.

Other artists intervene with the *Act* as a material document. Nadia Myre is an Algonquin artist and member of the Kitigan Zibi Anishnabeg First Nation whose expansive series of wall pieces, *Indian Act* (2000-2002), sews red and white glass beads over each of the 56 pages of the *Indian Act* (Figure 2). In various

stages of completion for each page, the white space is filled in with red beads, while the text is redacted with rows of white beadwork. The white beads within broad, red negative spaces wordlessly signifies the intrusion of settlers' laws on Native land. The very medium of beading to obscure the text is itself a protest against the *Act* (Mamers, 2024). Beading over the contents of laws intended to destroy First Nations, Inuit, and Métis ways of life is a powerful gesture symbolizing the survivance of Indigenous Peoples despite attempted cultural genocide (Gray, 2022). This artwork takes up the paperwork of the colonial state and alters its surface with Indigenous aesthetics to make more apparent to readers the consequences of the words on Indigenous Peoples' lives. The immense scale of this beadwork was a collective effort over three years between Myre and more than 230 other people. The colossal effort to complete the piece promotes a sustained reflection on the state of Indigenous rights in the midst of colonial oppression (Myre, 2003), while the communal creation enacts collective strength and possibilities for thrivance.

The goal of [residential] schools was to sever ties to Indigenous culture. Consequently, the children were purposefully indoctrinated with Euro-Christian arts like religious hymns, cross-stitching and needlepoint work, classical music, and theatre plays

(Diamond, 2021; de Leeuw, 2007).

RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS

The TRC (2015b) Call to Action #18 demands that the federal, provincial, territorial, and Indigenous governments "acknowledge that the current state of Aboriginal health in Canada is a direct result of previous Canadian government policies, including residential schools." Residential schools were a tool for the Canadian government to control and oppress Indigenous Peoples and cultures by forcibly extracting Indigenous children and placing them within Christian boarding schools. Residential schools did not educate but rather trained children to hold menial jobs while simultaneously stripping away ties to traditional livelihoods, "thus restricting their future socio-economic opportunities" (Loppie et al., 2014, p. 9) and instating systemic poverty (Reading, 2018). Over 150,000 Indigenous children passed through the residential school system from the 1870s to 1990s. An estimated 6,000 children did not make it out alive. There is increasing mainstream recognition of the horrific abuses experienced by First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children imprisoned in these schools. Much of this awareness has been generated by the relatively recent unearthing of mass burial sites of Indigenous children on school grounds (Maar et al., 2022).

Kent Monkman is a queer and Two-Spirit Cree artist whose work intervenes on western art historical styles with irreverent, satirical Indigenous aesthetics. His 2017 acrylic painting, *The Scream*, portrays the horrors of forcibly removing Indigenous children from their homes to attend residential schools. Royal Canadian Mounted Police, nuns, and priests rip children out of the arms of screaming mothers while children in the background attempt to flee the distressing scene. It is notable that the figures in this painting are wearing contemporary clothing, which points to how recently the last residential school closed (1996). Monkman incorporates the epic scale, movement, and drama of classical Baroque paintings to insert Indigenous perspectives into colonial histories. The titular nod to Edward Munch's painting, *The Scream*, further cements Monkman's work with other iconic paintings from western Europe while enacting Indigenous aesthetics and claiming the visual sovereignty to tell this history from a First Nations person's perspective. The title and epic visuals of this scene expose non-Indigenous audiences to the true trauma caused by residential schools (Madill, 2021).

All aspects of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children's lives were strictly regulated in residential schools. This included children's involvement with the arts (de Leeuw, 2007). The goal of the schools was to sever ties to Indigenous culture. Consequently, the children were purposefully indoctrinated with Euro-Christian arts like religious hymns, cross-stitching and needlepoint work, classical music, and theatre plays (Diamond, 2021; de Leeuw, 2007). Hymn music was a way to supplant the students' traditional songs and language because speaking one's mother tongue is a core aspect of cultural continuity (National Collaborating Centre Aboriginal Health,[4] 2016).

[4] On May 30, 2019, the National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health (NCCAH) officially became the National Collaborating Centre for Indigenous health (NCCIH).

However, arts in residential schools allowed for generative refusal wherein children creatively inverted the original goals of cultural genocide. Survivor interviews recount a healing element of music – even forced foreign music – that offered a source of comfort for the children in otherwise traumatic environments. Music also presented an opportunity for small rebellions, as first-hand accounts retell how children sometimes substituted the hymn's words for rhymes from their own language to humorous effects (Diamond, 2021). Such acts of resistance provided moments of reprieve for the children from the assimilationist agenda of residential schooling (de Leeuw, 2007). The arts were and are a means of survivance and healing from these traumas, whether carried out within the schools or afterwards.

The impact of residential schools has resulted in mass generational and intergenerational trauma that permeates numerous facets of health today, including mental health, stress-related illness, substance use, and violence (Castellano, 2018; Greenwood & Larstone, 2022; Reading, 2018; Reading & Wien, 2013; Richmond, 2018). The silencing effect of shame for one's Indigenous identity remains a barrier to healing for survivors and their family members. The Aboriginal Healing Foundation (2007-2014) reported that the survivors they worked with had lost the ability to express themselves because they were punished for speaking their minds and languages as children in residential schools (Archibald, 2012).

Writing about residential school experiences in poetry and music lyrics now helps survivors reclaim the voices they lost. Nisga'a writer and poet Jordan Abel (2020) explains in his artistic biography, *Nishga*, that writing provides two benefits. It helps him grapple with his inherited intergenerational trauma and fractured Indigenous identity, and also "invites a dialogue" with settler readers about how residential school trauma "has shaped and continues to shape us" (p. 37). The meditative time spent creatively writing, and even signing, re-establishes a voice for the voiceless.

Susan Aglukark is an Inuit singer-songwriter whose song "Circle of the Old" (2006) encourages and comforts Inuit Elders to speak the truth about what happened to them in residential schools. Lyrics like

> *"It hurts to remember it hurts to forget / We're caught in the middle afraid and regret"*

describe the internalized shame imposed onto survivors during their time in residential schools as well as the continued pressure they feel to stay silent. Aglukark offers an affirming mantra in the middle of this song in her own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These examples of song demonstrate the movement of survivance to thrivance through the arts. They assert Indigenous Peoples' right to exist in today's world while simultaneously voicing rallying cries to support one another's healing, honor ancestors, and take pride in one's Indigenous identity.

Inuktitut language:

> *"Kappiasungilanga, Ilirasungilanga / Ilirasungilanga, Kappiasungilanga (May I not be afraid / May I not feel fear of disapproval)."*

Speaking Inuktitut directly to Elders counters the attempted eradication of Indigenous languages in residential schools while re-forging intergenerational relationships (Diamond, 2021).

Aglukark is far from the only singer directly addressing residential schools in their work. The duo ShoShona Kish (Anishinaabekwe) and Raven Kanatakta (Onkwehón:we Mohawk and Anishinabe Algonquin) are two members of the band Digging Roots – winner of two Junos. They have recorded several songs about the intergenerational trauma of residential schools. The lyrics of "Cut My Hair" (2022) describe the traumatic assimilationist practice of cutting children's hair when they arrive at school to break cultural traditions and enforce western rule:

> *"When they cut my hair / I said they're tryin' to cut down my roots / Oh when they cut my hair / I said they're tryin' to cut down my roots / Won't even let me speak my words / Ahh, they're trying to take that too."*

Songs like this one offer three things at once: a condemnation of residential school systems, an education to non-Indigenous people who are learning about these practices for the first time, and a healing space for survivors and loved ones. As Kanatakta (2021) explains,

> *Music is my mishkiki (medicine) and it affords me the opportunity to transform the pain into a celebration of being alive, that we are still here, that I am what our Ancestors dreamt about…. I burn sweetgrass freely, my hair is long.*

These examples of song demonstrate the movement of survivance to thrivance through the arts. They assert Indigenous Peoples' right to exist in today's world while simultaneously voicing rallying cries to support one another's healing, honor ancestors, and take pride in one's Indigenous identity.

INDIAN HOSPITALS

Twenty-nine Indian Hospitals operated from the 1930s to the 1980s to segregate First Nations, Inuit, and Métis patients from settler populations. The hospitals were founded because of racist fears about Indigenous persons spreading communicable diseases. Ironically, diseases such as smallpox, whooping cough, measles, and tuberculosis were actually introduced by settlers and were extremely destructive to Indigenous communities (Turpel-Lafond, 2021).[5] Similar to the practices of residential schools, patients of Indian Hospitals were isolated from their families and held against their will – sometimes for years and even decades (First Nations Health Council, 2011). Aside from treating diseases, these under-funded and ill-equipped hospitals became sites of medical experimentation upon Indigenous patients who did not consent to the procedures and sometimes did not realize were taking place (Greenwood & MacDonald, 2022; Mosby, 2013; Mosby & Swindrovich, 2021; Richardson & Sutherland, 2022).

Settler culpability for the introduction of communicable diseases is a topic artist Ruth Cuthand (Plains Cree, Scottish, and Irish) addresses in her artwork. Cuthand deploys the traditional art of beading to depict an uncustomary subject: microscopy "portraits" of communicable diseases that have significantly affected Indigenous Peoples since first contact (Figure 3). Cuthand says that besides introducing scores of deadly diseases, the colonial reserve system established by the *Indian Act* exacerbated the rapid spread of disease in Indigenous communities. It did so by oppressing economic development and enforcing geographic isolation that led to overcrowded and substandard living conditions. The brilliant beadwork of virulent diseases "confronts the most difficult truths about Canadian society and the impacts of colonization on Aboriginal people," while also making these topics "remarkably palatable when delivered in a strikingly seductive package" (Cuthand, n.d., n.p.). Cuthand enacts Indigenous aesthetics by pairing the alluring qualities of beadwork with pathogenic portraits. These works invite audiences to critically engage with the consequences of settler-colonial disturbances to Indigenous lives and livelihoods.

Indian hospital patients give testimonies about experiencing physical, psychological, and sexual abuse that echo those reported by residential school survivors (Drees, 2013; Lux, 2016; Sterritt & Dufresne, 2018). As well, long confinements thousands of kilometers away from home for some made it difficult for patients to rebuild their lives and relationships upon release. The combination of an unfamiliar environment and separation from family members

[5] As of 2022, the First Nations identity and achievements of the *In Plain Sight: Addressing Indigenous-specific Racism and Discrimination in B.C.* report's lead author are widely disputed. However, many credible Indigenous scholars, writers, and knowledge holders (though unnamed, as often happens in government reports) contributed to *In Plain Sight.* The findings of the report, that anti-Indigenous racism is prevalent across the healthcare system, are not disputed.

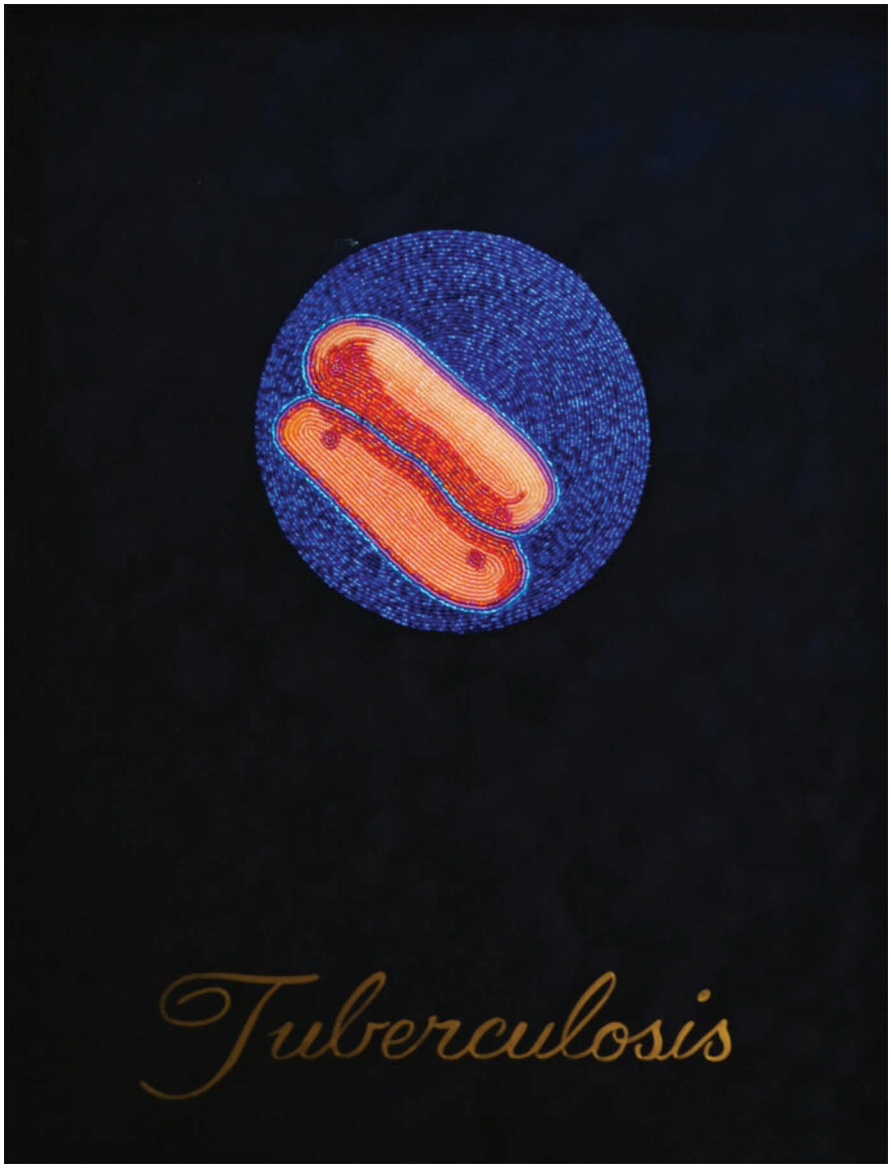

FIGURE 3. RUTH CUTHAND, "RESERVING…TUBERCULOSIS," GLASS BEADS ON BACKING, 2009.

Image courtesy of artist Ruth Cuthand.

for indefinite lengths of time – all while living under the spectre of devastating diseases – resulted in intergenerational traumas for many patients and family members (Crawford et al., 2020; Kotierk, 2022; Patra, 2019). This is a history Canada has yet to fully acknowledge and account for (Greenwood, 2014).

As with some residential school students, some Indian Hospital patients found solace in the arts as a way to survive forced confinements. For example, women and girls at the Nanaimo Indian Hospital were provided with beadwork materials (Drees, 2013). Inuit patients with tuberculosis at Mountain Sanatorium in Hamilton, Ontario, which saw more than 1,200 patients between 1958-1972, were sometimes provided with soapstone and embroidery materials to create sculptures or dolls (Patra, 2019). The patients could then sell the artwork in the hospital gift shops to buy food or other supplies from the canteen. These were small comforts to ease the tedium of confinement.

Institutionalization made patients more vulnerable to medical experimentation and coercive treatments. Cultural differences,

FIGURE 4. VANESSA DION FLETCHER, "OWN YOUR CERVIX," INSTALLATION, 2016/17.

Image courtesy of artist Vanessa Dion Fletcher.

language barriers, and lack of interpreters meant that consent for medical treatments obtained from Indigenous patients was often not fully informed, if any consent was sought at all (Drees, 2013). Such medical procedures even included permanent and life-altering surgeries like sexual sterilization (Lux, 2016; Stote, 2022). While eugenics-era sterilization policies of the mid-20th century did not target Indigenous women per se, they did target those deemed "feebleminded," a categorization under which Indigenous women fell according to pervasive racist logic (Boyer & Leggett, 2022, p. 41). What followed were genocidal rates of sterilization; "for example, while the Indigenous population of Alberta was just over 3%, it represented over 25% of the total people sterilized" and "26% of women of Igloolik between 30 and 50" were sterilized by the 1970s (Boyer & Leggett, 2022, p. 41). Forced and coercive sterilization procedures continue to be reported to this day (Johnson-Jennings & Jennings, 2023; Stote, 2022). Such abhorrent practices prove continued inclinations to undermine Indigenous self-determination because of racist attitudes and the desire to subsume Native lands and people (Women's Earth Alliance & Native Youth Sexual Health Network, 2018).

Although Indian hospitals are now closed, the medical racism at the foundation of these institutions persists. That is why Vanessa Dion Fletcher, a Lenape and Potawatomi artist, invited visitors into Toronto's Tangled Art Gallery in 2017 to perform a cervical self-examination behind a privacy curtain furnished with a low bench upholstered with leather and beadwork, an adjustable task light, and a mirror mounted to the wall (Figure 4). This portion of Dion Fletcher's participatory installation, entitled, *Own Your Cervix* (2017), was a response to the forced sexual sterilizations of Indigenous persons with uteruses.[6] As patients are not typically able

[6] *Own Your Cervix* is also a reference to Annie Sprinkle's 1990 performance piece, *A Public Cervix Announcement*, which is a descendent of the feminist art movements of the 1960s and 70s (Aulombard-Arnaud, 2021).

to participate in gynecological examinations, Dion Fletcher provided visitors with the means and agency to do so. Other parts of the exhibition include pelvic wallpaper printed with the artist's own menstrual blood and a white Victorian-era loveseat punctured with clusters of dangerous-looking porcupine quills. The invitation to seize knowledge over one's own anatomy and the fearless display of menstrual blood was aimed at destigmatizing the bodies of those who menstruate, promoting Indigenous self-determination and reclaiming the right to parenthood (Rice et al., 2021).

Indigenous artists rally against the mistreatment of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis patients and boldly exhibit the truths of colonial medical violence. Issues like patient privacy, trauma, shame, and social hierarchies between patients and physicians make medical mistreatment all the more difficult to talk about openly (Boyer & Leggett, 2022). Artists' visualizations of traumatic experiences become steppingstones to confront and unsettle racist medical histories. For example, Fletcher's quill-punctured love seat is now on display in the education wing of the Women's College Hospital Centre for Wise Practices in Indigenous Health, where it may "allow a reprieve from the colonialism and ableism of English" (Fletcher, 2023; n.p.). Inserting Indigenous aesthetics over colonial-era furniture and mobilizing communicative strategies like color, materiality, and visual symbolism may be more accessible entry points to discuss difficult topics than directly speaking about reproductive traumas. Further, exhibiting creative and artistic work to non-Indigenous audiences – including physicians – may educate those who have very little knowledge of what has and continues to happen within Canadian medical institutions.

RESOURCE EXTRACTION

In Meagan Musseau's 2017 endurance performance piece, "when they poison the bogs we will still braid sweetgrass," the Mi'kmaq artist braids long lengths of bright orange safety tape wrapped around a tree on Sacred Buffalo Guardian Mountain in Banff, Alberta. The orange safety tape – typically used to demarcate land for logging or other industry extraction – here replaces the lengths of sweetgrass that would normally be braided for use in baskets and mats or for medicinal purposes. Musseau appropriates the industrial material in her braiding to affirm the survivance of Indigenous cultural practices in the face of ongoing land destruction (Power, 2018).

Musseau's performance prompts audiences to scrutinize industrial encroachment and the impact that land destruction has and continues to have on Indigenous Peoples. Suppressive policies like the Doctrine of Discovery and the *Indian Act* were developed in part to help colonizers capitalize on the natural resources of Canada. Establishing the reservation system in the *Indian Act* paved the way for unfettered exploitation of land, water, and air outside of these reserve areas. Although treaties and reserves ostensibly protect lands from further settler encroachment, time and time again these promises are broken and boundaries are breached (Six Nations of the Grand River, 2019; Smith & Waters, 2022). Natural resource exploitation continues to violently deterritorialize Indigenous Peoples today in the ceaseless process of colonization (Green et al., 2023).

The ways in which deterritorialization and extractivism harm the health and well-being of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples are profound and multi-faceted. They include disrupting "relationships with and dependence on the land, waters, animals, plants and natural resources for their sustenance, livelihoods, cultures, identities, health and well-being" (Greenwood et al., 2022, p. 120). Indigenous ways of life and spiritual relationships to land are acutely reactive to pollution, deforestation, mining runoff that poisons waterways (Richmond, 2018; Tes et al., 2022), as well as extreme weather events propelled by the climate crisis (Green et al., 2023). These harms are all amplified on reserve lands – places purposefully chosen and constructed by the State to be inferior to surrounding lands (de Leeuw et al., 2012; Mosby & Swindrovich, 2021; Reading, 2018).

Indigenous artists are crucial voices for planetary advocacy and educating non-Indigenous audiences about land destruction in northern and rural regions, as these spaces generally escape the scrutiny of southern and urban Canadians.

Advocating for and protecting the environment are essential aspects of health for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people. Indigenous people cannot have healthy bodies without a healthy planet (Kitty & Funnell, 2020). Land is the site of important cultural artifacts and landmarks, and stewardship of land is vital for maintaining "spirituality, rituals and for their healing powers; for maintaining ancestral connections through stories and kinship; for gathering medicinal plants and

foods; … for teaching the history and culture of a people; and for [enhancing] the intergenerational transfer of knowledge" (NCCIH, 2020, p. 13). Indigenous artists are crucial voices for planetary advocacy and educating non-Indigenous audiences about land destruction in northern and rural regions, as these spaces generally escape the scrutiny of southern and urban Canadians.

Contrary to the male-centric notions of soldiers and defense perpetuated by western patriarchy, First Nations women of the Pacific Northwest hold the front lines against industrial encroachment of their peoples' territories (de Leeuw et al., 2018). Women in these Nations "are the water protectors, land defenders, warriors, and caretakers" (Moor & Zapf, 2017, p. 9). Artistic practices share these efforts and rally support from distant allies. A series of nine zines, or self-published and often artistically accentuated magazines, entitled, *Voices: Indigenous Women on the Front Lines Speak* (2017), was spearheaded by artists beyon wren moor (Pimicikamak Nehiyaw and Ukrainian) and Wulfgang Zapf. Figure 5 depicts a print moor created for the zines, which also combine interviews, poems, illustrations, and photographs from an intergenerational mix of Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit land defenders, including:

- Helen Knott (Dane Zaa),
- Koot-Ges (Nisga'a, Tsimshian, and Haida),
- Christin Jack (St'at'imc),
- Christie Brown (Gitxsan and Scottish),
- Queen Sacheen (Nuu-Chah-Nulth/ Coast Salish),
- Destiny Michell (Unist'ot'en),
- Freda Huson (Unist'ot'en),
- Dorris Russo (Unist'ot'en and Lht'at'en), and
- Molly Wickam (Gitxsan and Gidimt'en Clan).

This artistic micro-publication series showcases the bravery of land defenders in the fight to "live as sovereign people, to be

FIGURE 5. BEYON WREN MOOR, "THE BRIDGE TO UNIST'OT'EN," COPPER PLATE ETCHING PRINT, 2017.

Image courtesy of artist beyon wren moor.

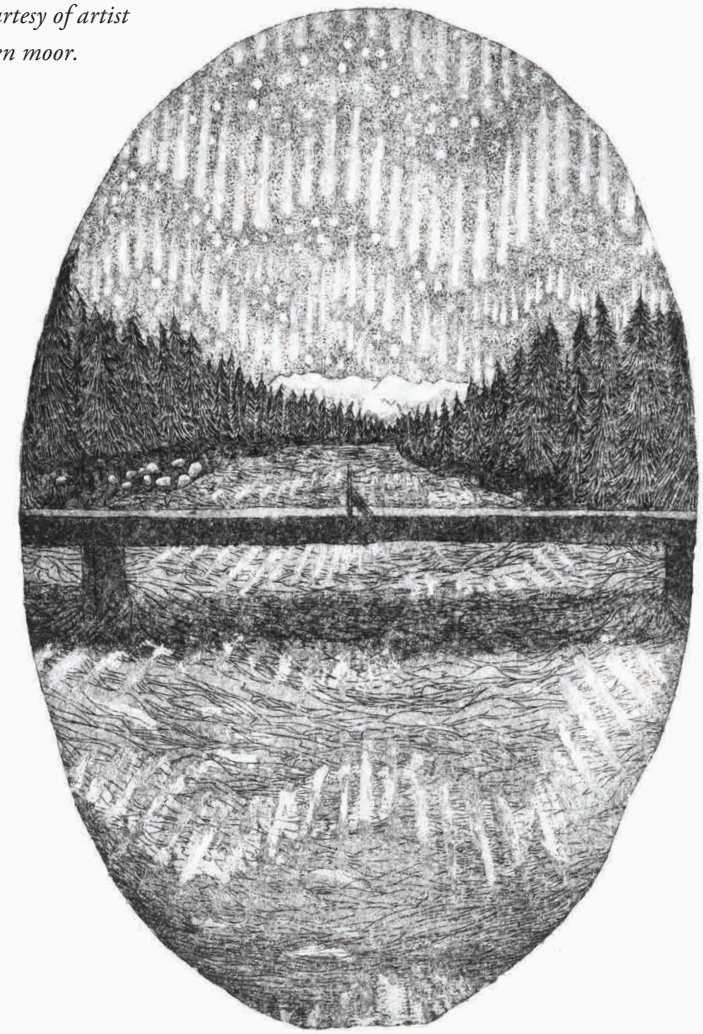

FIGURE 6. ELIZABETH LAPENSÉE, "THUNDERBIRD STRIKE," DIGITAL MIXED MEDIA, MINING TRUCK TIRE, COPPER, WATER, BONE, 2017.

Image courtesy of artist Elizabeth LaPensée.

connected to our lands, to have healthy families, to have healthy nations" (Wickham, 2017 p. 23). Sales of the zines support the work of the people featured in them. Readers can gain insights into the impacts of remote industrial encroachment on the health and well-being of First Nations peoples through the intimate lens of these first-person narratives.

Another distributable art form advocating for land rights, reclamation, and flourishing comes from Anishinaabe, Métis, and Irish game designer Elizabeth LaPensée. She developed *Thunderbird Strike* (2017), a video game where the player controls a legendary thunderbird as it flies above lands, waters, and animals harmed by oil extraction. In the game, the thunderbird harnesses the power of lightning to both destroy fossil fuel pipelines and infrastructure as well as revive the human and animal victims of pollution (Figure 6). In the end, windmills replace the oil rigs. This game presents a wish fulfillment to disrupt the ongoing pollution and destruction of Indigenous lands while promoting alternative means for sustainable futures. It also offers an opportunity for concrete environmental activism through its website. For example, players may print open access posters from the website designed by other artists like Dylan Miner (Métis Nation of Ontario) and Isaac Murdoch (Ojibwe of the Serpent River First Nation) to display while participating in environmental advocacy protests (LaPensée, 2017; Isaac, 2022).

Thunderbird Strike educates non-Indigenous people about the issue of oil pollution using the engaging and participatory medium of video games. The game is part of a growing Indigenous Futurism arts movement, which uses new media and science fiction to imagine what a decolonized world could look like (Kinder, 2021). The realization of alternative and sustainable energy supplies like windmills points towards an achievable not-too-distant future – shifts that are foundational to move from survivance to thrivance. *Thunderbird Strike*, along with the other artworks in this section, is meant to raise awareness and gain the allyship of other Indigenous and non-Indigenous residents of Turtle Island for the remote front-line activism, urban protests, and court cases that defend the lands, waterways, and air from industrial pollution for the health and well-being of us all.

THE MASSEY REPORT

Through their very creation, any First Nations, Inuit, and Métis artistic expression is a rebellion and act of survivance against laws and actions that sought to extinguish these cultures. The production of creative works that redress the histories, laws, and policies aimed at eradicating Indigeneity is an empowering method of reclaiming ways of knowing and promoting healing. Sharing these works with others extends their activist powers and potentials for forming pride and community. However, artists typically need to be funded for distribution and dissemination pathways or have their work exhibited in major galleries and museums to reach and educate a great number of people. Federal funding and institutional support have been and remain barriers to this aim.

Museums in Canada were founded as part of the colonial agenda. They are, in part, culpable for the attempted cultural genocide of Indigenous Peoples by using their prestigious platforms to propagate revisionist narratives of terra nullius and for constructing a national visual identity that excluded Indigenous artists (Crosby, 2007; Moray, 2007). For example, the extreme nationalism of post-World War II Canada led to renewed efforts to establish a state-defined notion of what it means to be "authentically" Canadian. To this end, the publication of the 1951 Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences Report, better known as the Massey Report, provided the rationale to establish the Canada Council for the Arts (CCA), which is still the primary federal funding body for artists today. The Massey Report proposed that Indigenous arts be excluded from CCA funding. Instead, argued the Massey Report, the CCA should fund Anglo-Franco arts as the epitome of Canadian aesthetics and heritage (Rodriguez, 2022).

Nowhere is the exclusion of Indigenous artists more evident than the frequent promotion and exhibition of the "Group of Seven," an arts collective operating from 1920-1933 whose works were consciously selected by the National Art Gallery of Canada in Ottawa as the agreed upon Anglo-Franco version of nationhood (Crosby, 2007; Zemans, 2007). These artists, all men of European descent, depicted the Canadian landscape as open and free, again upholding the colonial notion of terra nullius. Any references to Indigenous arts, such as those by the Group of Seven affiliate member, Emily Carr (1871-1945), only served to extend colonial fantasies of long-past or dying Indigenous cultures.

Carr painted rotting totem poles in abandoned villages on Haida Gwaii as symbolic of what she believed to be the demise of Indigenous culture. Although Carr purported to have deep affiliations with the First Nations communities that hosted her on Haida Gwaii, art historians like Marcia Crosby (Tsimshian-Haida) argue that her work "denies the existence of systems of signs encoded in visual images, dress, language, ritual, that have specific sociopolitical and religious meanings for specific nations of people," as they instead became a "container for her Eurocentric beliefs" (2007, p. 221 & 222). Selected for Canada's

first Venice Biennale pavilion exhibition in 1952, Carr's work extended settler discourses about Indigenous cultures being relics of the past to the world stage rather than promoting the resilient cultures persisting in the midst of oppressive regimes (Hunt, 2023; Verjee, 2018; Xhignesse, 2021).

During this same time, 1951 amendments to the *Indian Act* removed the prohibitions against expressions of Indigenous arts and culture. However, the Massey Report that was published that very same year restricted public funding for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis artists. These two policy changes demonstrate Canada's continued structural racism against Indigenous Peoples (Gayed, 2021). Structural racism refers to a system of policies that adapt over time to ensure the inequity of marginalized groups (Loppie et al., 2014; Osei-Tutu et al., 2023; Reading & Wien, 2013). The history of federal arts funding and exhibitions shows how Indigenous artists have faced barriers to sharing, profiting, and flourishing by design. When artists from the nearly 600 distinct Indigenous cultures of so-called Canada are excluded from displaying their own perspectives in national art institutions, their potential contributions to nation building are dismissed.

In response to the racist exclusion of Indigenous arts exhibition and funding, Daphne Odjig founded the "Indian Group of Seven" art collective in 1973 to politically engage with widespread anti-Indigenous curatorial practices. Odjig was a Potawatomi artist born on the Wikwemikong reserve in 1919. After her surreal and cubist style was accepted by mainstream art galleries in the 1960s, she became one of the first Indigenous painters to address colonial violence and the isolation created by the reserve system in her work. This marked a transition from viewing Indigenous arts as artifacts to acknowledging Indigenous aesthetics within the contemporary art world. She also founded the first Indigenous-owned art gallery in Canada in 1974, called the New Warehouse Gallery, to support and exhibit Indigenous artists who experienced barriers to mainstream inclusion. After receiving wide acclaim and accolades over her long career, Odjig became the first First Nations woman to receive a solo exhibition at the National Art Gallery of Canada in 2009: "The Drawings and Paintings of Daphne Odjig: A Retrospective Exhibition." Odjig died in 2016 at the age of 97 and is now remembered as the "grandmother of Aboriginal art" (National Gallery of Canada, 2007, p. 2).

Diligent and ceaseless activism demonstrated by artists like Odjig changed how federal arts funding was allocated into the 21st century. Shirking the Euro-centric vision of the Massey Report, the CCA appointed an Aboriginal Arts Secretariate in 1994 to fund Indigenous artists. In 2017, the Creating, Knowing and Sharing: The Arts and Cultures of First Nations, Inuit and Métis Peoples program was established. This dedicated funding stream aims to support Indigenous artists, arts organizations, and arts programming to disseminate cultural knowledge nationally and internationally (CCA, n.d.). This program both recognizes Indigenous artists' contributions to the cultural and visual identity of Canada and seeks to mend the CCA's relationship with Indigenous Peoples.

In recognition of the artistic accomplishments of Indigenous artists, a jury of art professionals and the National Gallery of Canada selected the Isuma Art Collective to represent Canada at the 2018 Venice Biennale. This collective is made up of four Igloolik-based Inuit film artists: Zacharias Kunuk, Paul Apak, Pauloosie Qulitalik, and Norman Cohn. This marks the first time Inuit artists were exhibited at the world's most prestigious art exhibition. The Isuma Art Collective claims the visual sovereignty to exhibit the history and contemporary realities of Inuit land dispossession. This work includes *One Day in the Life of Noah Piugattuk* (Figure 7), a dramatic film re-enacting a Canadian government representative's visit to Baffin Island to convince Inuit Elder

Noah Piugattuk to relocate to the settlement of Igloolik, where Canada was attempting to bolster strategic land claims in the Cold War era of the 1960s. This film is complemented by a documentary about a 2012 town hall meeting in Baffin Island where Inuit residents voiced their concerns over pollution and the decline in the animal population caused by the local iron ore mine. The Isuma Art Collective boldly showcases traumatic histories and current struggles of Inuit peoples to live and thrive on their ancestral lands (Williams, 2019). They demonstrate the resilience of Indigenous Peoples and the vital role of artists to share the truths of colonial regimes.

Barriers to exhibiting and accessing funding from the CCA remain, particularly in remote northern communities where internet access and language barriers are more acute. However, the above initiatives and exhibitions mark efforts toward reconciliation and equity in arts funding and promotion. The artists awarded with grants and exhibitions now have the platform to re-tell their histories from their own perspectives to wider audiences than ever before. Disseminating authentic cultural expression, building cultural pride by receiving arts awards, and claiming the right to take up space in galleries and museums all positively impact well-being and open pathways for Indigenous thrivance.

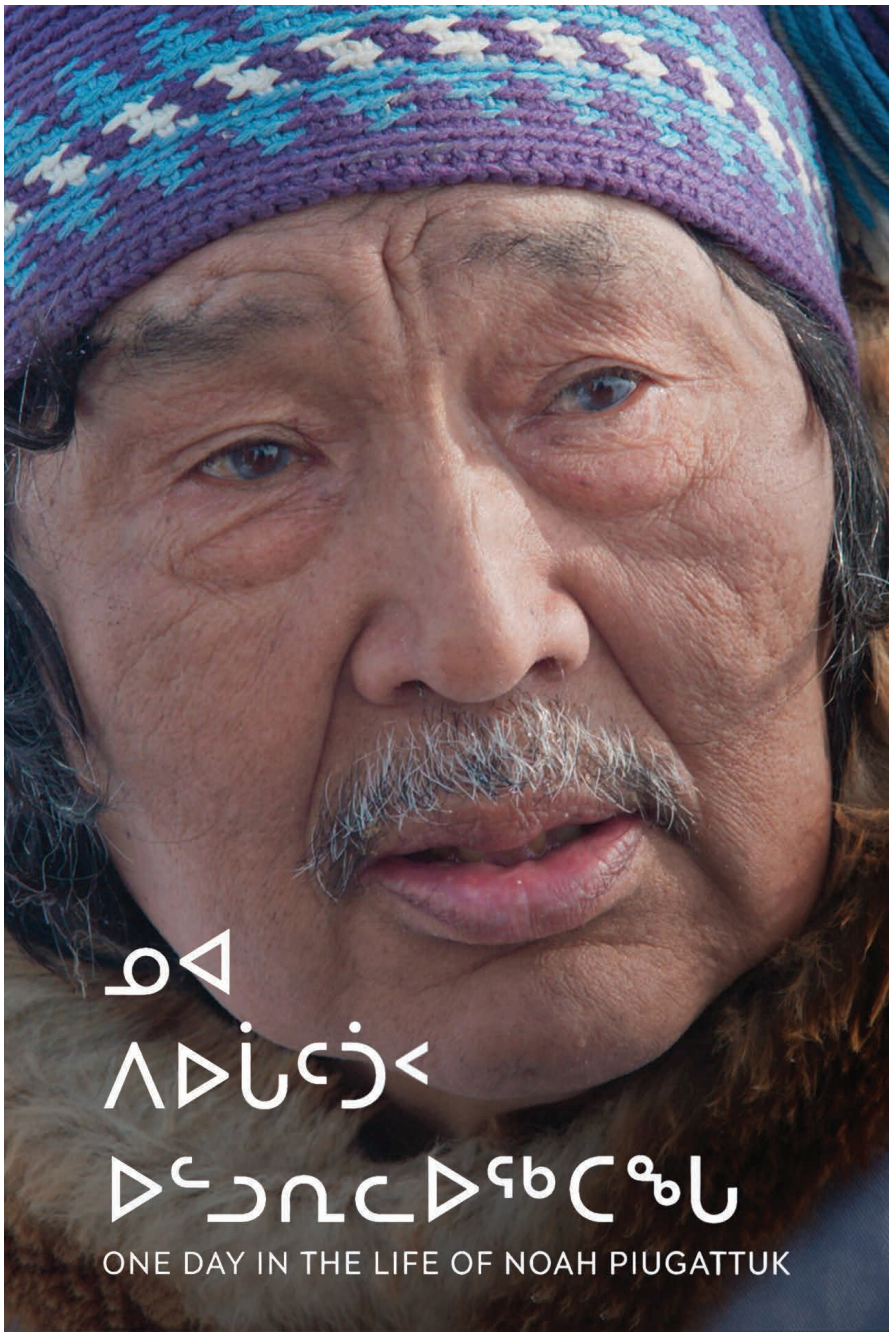

FIGURE 7. KINGULLIIT PRODUCTIONS / IGLOOLIK ISUMA PRODUCTIONS, FROM ONE DAY IN THE LIFE OF NOAH PIUGATTUK, 2019, FILM STILL / PROMO MATERIAL.

Courtesy of Isuma Distribution International.

FIGURE 8. LISA BOIVIN, "OUR WEIRD RAVEN," PART 2, DIGITAL COLLAGE, 2024.

Image courtesy of artist Lisa Boivin.

CONCLUSION

Contemporary Indigenous artists are reclaiming cultural and artistic sovereignty to both critique and redress harmful policies and educate Indigenous and non-Indigenous members of the public alike about colonial traumas from their own perspectives. Arts are empowering First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples to practice cultural expressions in ways that promote wholistic health. They do this by rebuilding the connections to culture and identity that have been eroded by colonialism. Indigenous artist-activists are therefore making space for thrivance in the face of ongoing coloniality. The artists discussed here exemplify how creative practices do more than reveal the truths about settler violence. They also initiate and support the healing, well-being, and flourishing of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples.

We return to "Our Weird Raven" (Figure 8), which Boivin has now slightly altered by reversing the position of the black and striped geometric shapes. This work, along with the other works of art discussed in this paper, defies settler imaginaries for a static- or long-past Indigenous culture. Instead, its iconography is referential to the multiple worlds that First Nations, Inuit, and Métis artists traverse and adapt to historically and today. In contrast to the first iteration of "Our Weird Raven" at the beginning of this paper, the bars of captivity are in the far distance behind this central figure as Raven looks into the future. Raven is captured on the edge of a precipice, poised to address and overcome the ever-changing landscape of settler-colonialism. Indigenous collage theory contextualizes such an assemblage as the lived experiences of connecting to one's heritage while navigating colonized lands (Charlie 2016; Charlie 2021). Collage, as an image-making method, exemplifies how art is mutable, transformative, and bridges language and cultures. The unconventional title of "Weird" similarly speaks to circumstances of betweenness or discomfiting yet staying true to one's authentic self. Exhibiting these arts acknowledges the strength and survivance of Indigeneity. It documents these strengths for the entire nation and world. Most importantly, it ensures that art remains a vibrant and fierce force in the lives and health of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples and communities.

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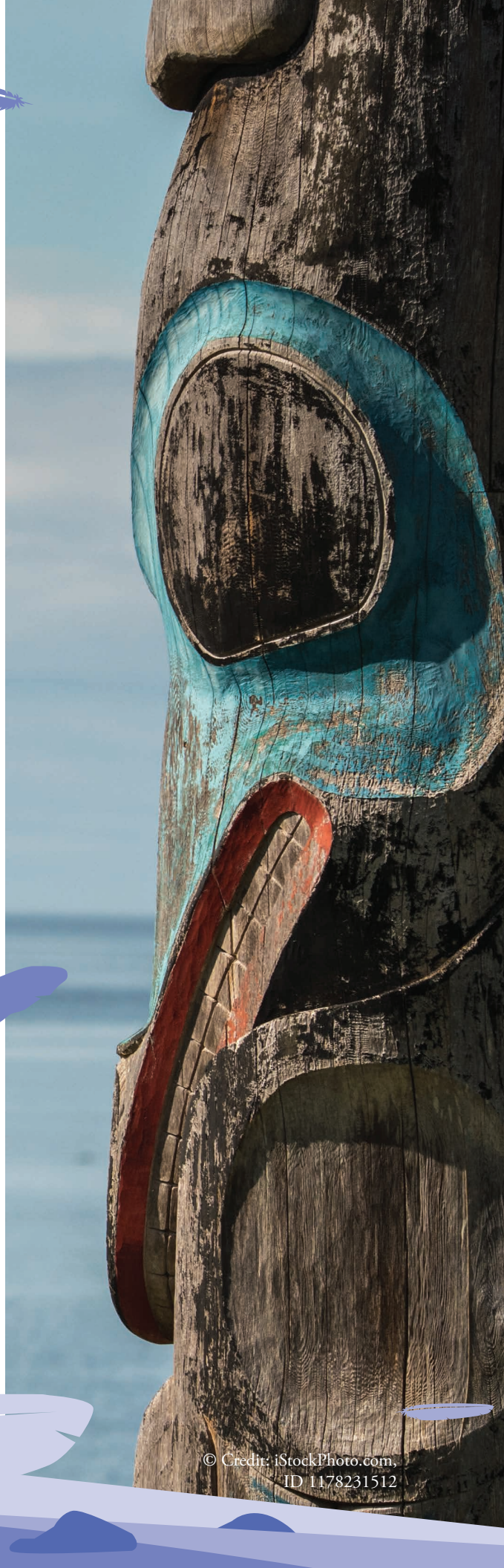

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National Collaborating Centre for Indigenous Health
Centre de collaboration nationale de la santé autochtone

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