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**A Better Home on Native Land:  
Reflections on the Question of Home and  
Being Good Relations**

On February 9, 2023, celebrated Canadian R&B artist Jully Black stepped into the limelight at the NBA All-Star Game in Salt Lake City, Utah, to sing the Canadian national anthem. In front of a global audience, Black changed one word: from “home *and* native land” to “home *on* native land.”<sup>1</sup> In response to this alteration, Black received a torrent of racist, anti-Black hate speech, and personal threats on social media.<sup>2</sup> On April 3, the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) honoured Black with a Blanketing Ceremony, led by AFN knowledge keeper and chief RoseAnne Archibald, to acknowledge Black’s conviction and bravery for standing with Indigenous peoples and for Indigenous rights. Chief Archibald stated, “She shifted consciousness in that moment on a huge international stage, simply for singing the truth.”<sup>3</sup> Moved by this honour, Black said, “I didn’t realize that my action would garner such a response.”<sup>4</sup>

Black was inspired to act when she learned of the uncovering—not discovering—of 215 unmarked graves of Indigenous children at the former Kamloops Industrial School in May 2021. This event was a catalyst that brought national and international attention to the stark and disturbing realities of Indian residential and day schools that operated across Canada between the 1870s and 1990s. An estimated 150,000 Indigenous children were forced to attend, and an estimated 6,000 children died.<sup>5</sup> For decades, Indigenous peoples have been advocating for recognition, reparation, and reconciliation for these atrocities from a settler state that had obstinately denied any responsibility or wrongdoing. Black stated that she can no longer sing the conventional Canadian anthem, knowing this history of institutional racism and genocide.<sup>6</sup> And before an AFN audience, Black said, “On behalf of the Black community, I say we are one. We’re better together.”<sup>7</sup>

Black’s actions address issues of structural racism and settler colonialism that continue to shape Canadian society and identity. These issues impact the lives of Indigenous nations/peoples, where Indigenous histories and experiences are diminished and decentred, ignored, silenced, and erased. This represents a settler exceptionalism based on ideals of *terra nullius* (empty lands) and the doctrine of discovery, and the propagation of Western European civilization. Together, it describes the colonial project in Canada that speaks of nationhood conviction and justification, stability, and strength, i.e., *home and native land*. But what is lacking from this nationalist narrative is an acknowledgement and, like Archibald said, a consciousness of the multifaceted and continuous relations Indigenous nations/peoples have with and on the Land in different storied places. These storied, relational places aggregate into situated Indigenous homelands and traditional territories that overlap and are intersectional—places where different collective nations/peoples, who are human and other-than-human, interact, interrelate, and negotiate shared space/place through kinship and reciprocity, diplomacy, and non-interference. The Land holds these complex co-constitutive, multi-nation relations, which therefore cannot be possessed or abstracted, nor forgotten. Black’s words and actions speak of reconciliation for the dispossession of Indigenous relations caused by settler colonialism, and rec-

ognition of the sovereignty and self-determination of Indigenous nations/peoples as a matter of Indigenous rights, i.e., *home on native land*.

This complex idea of home on native land and Canada brings us to the main themes of the book *No Better Home? Jews, Canada, and the Sense of Belonging*. Edited by David S. Koffman, this book brings together Jewish and Jewish studies scholars on the question: “Has there ever been a better home for Jews than Canada?”<sup>8</sup> The different chapters weave through themes of settlement, diaspora, genocide, multiculturalism, diversity, racialization, assimilation, marginalization, political advocacy, enfranchisement, citizenship, patriotism, nationalism, transnationalism, belonging, nostalgia, community(ies), and place and location. Crucially, it is a book that centres Jewish voices, experiences, cultures, histories, thought, and socio-political positions as part of the Canadian experience. It serves as a reflection on and affirmation of the presence and relevancy of Jewish people and communities in Canada, and their impact on Canadian society. The value in this book is how it engages questions of Jewish Canadian experiences that do not conform squarely to the nationalist narratives of Canada, and undeterredly negotiates claims of Canadian identity as Jewish people and communities.

As an Indigenous studies scholar and Métis citizen born and raised in the Batoche homeland in Saskatchewan, the history and expressions of Jewish life in Canada raised in this book are insightful, engaging, and relevant. As a former student in Jewish studies at Concordia University in Montreal, I appreciate the affirmation of Jewish identity that is diverse, situated, complex, and intersectional, which also resists the racializing discourse of Canadian identity. I see a resemblance of self-awareness and self-determination in the Métis Nation. As Métis, or *li gens libre* (the free people) or the *otipemisiwak* (the people who own themselves), we have struggled for Indigenous rights and self-determination against the impositions of settler colonialism and the dispossession of our relational homelands, knowledges, and governance. We challenge racializing discourse in Canada that marginalizes us as “the forgotten people” or as an “Indian problem” that needs to be enfranchised or eliminated. Unfortunately, we also get swept up by normalizing discourse around race and identity (i.e., internalized racism, aspirational whiteness, and lateral violence), heteronormativity, gender, and sexual violence, and engagement in non-consensual economic exploitation. However, through these contradictions and force relations, we hold to our core principles of relationality that define us as Indigenous. Broadly speaking, the Métis engage in an ethic of *wahkotowin* (kinship or relatedness) and *making kin*, or as Sisseton Dakota scholar Kim TallBear explains, “making people into familiars in order to relate.”<sup>9</sup> As all Indigenous nations/peoples do in their own way, Métis are invested in making kin and good relations within our nation, and with other nations/peoples, who are human and other-than-human, in storied places, homelands, and territories that we share.<sup>10</sup> This is what makes us a Métis Nation.

Based in this relational ethic, I have always understood myself as a non-Jewish, Michif/Métis man making kin with and learning from my Jewish relatives. Therefore, I was delighted to see a relational engagement reflected in Koffman's chapter, entitled "The Unsettling of Canadian Jewish History: Toward a Tangled History of Jewish-Indigenous Encounters," which focuses on instances and intersections of Jewish and Indigenous encounters throughout Canadian history.<sup>11</sup> The operational factor in Koffman's work is the question of *encounters*, which speaks of the tension that Jewish settlers in Canada face between engaging an ethic of Indigenous relationality in making kin and assenting to the normalizing pressures of the colonial project. This tension between good relations and settler colonialism is discussed in four sections: (1) historical exposition of Jewish-Indigenous encounters that hint at but fall short of exploring kinship relations; (2) the ideals of Jewishness and Indigeneity intersecting as "imagined relations" through arts and literature, culture and identity; (3) activism from Jewish legal and academic professionals in recognizing Indigenous rights and struggles against colonial dispossession and assimilation; and (4) advocacy and solidarity from Jewish institutions in Canada that critique Canadian policies of Indigenous elimination as well as multiculturalism for totalizing and silencing Indigenous voices and experiences.<sup>12</sup>

Though Jewish people and communities have taken action to challenge Canada's structural issues of anti-Indigenous racism, Koffman holds no illusions about the complexity of these encounters. Koffman mentions instances of Jewish complicity in the colonial project, such as participation in the trans-Atlantic Fur Trade, salvage anthropology, and the global market of Indigenous material culture; self-Indigenization and "settler moves to innocence" as a means to justify Jewish settlement on Indigenous traditional territories; and participation of Jewish families in the 60s Scoop that saw the forced removal and adoption of thousands of Indigenous children into non-Indigenous homes.<sup>13</sup> Notably, Koffman also points to examples where Indigenous leaders deployed antisemitic rhetoric, like in Métis leader Louis Riel's nineteenth-century writings about the Jewish racialized moral character, and the former AFN chief David Ahenakew's antisemitic diatribe in 2002.<sup>14</sup> These are unfortunate examples of how both Jewish and Indigenous peoples deployed racism in ways that hurt the other. But, more importantly, it makes clear the role that white supremacy plays, historically and currently, in shaping Canada as a settler society, and which negatively impact Jewish and Indigenous peoples alike.

This represents a key element to Koffman's work in highlighting that Canada's history is unambiguously a story of settler colonialism.<sup>15</sup> The promise of being and becoming Canadian was and remains conditioned by the colonial project, which is defined by Indigenous dispossession and white possessiveness. Indigenous nations/peoples and Indigenous studies scholars have always advocated this critical perspective.<sup>16</sup> In response to the possessive ethos of the American Dream, Kim TallBear explains, "While the foundation of Indigenous elimination is one of white supremacy, it

is not only white people in power who work to eliminate or erase Indigenous peoples. Dreaming, even in inclusive and multicultural tones, of developing an ideal settler state implicitly supports the elimination of Indigenous peoples from this place.”<sup>17</sup> The ugly truth is that the promise or dream of Canada as a settler state is built on stolen Land, Indigenous territories, and relations. The solution resides in the question that is seldom articulated in settler societies: *how do you make a better home on native land?* Koffman arrives at the solution by stating that making Canada a “better home” for Jewish people and communities necessitates self-reflexive “calls for grappling with a more nuanced ‘settler-side’ history.”<sup>18</sup>

Like July Black’s affirmation of Black solidarity, Koffman is heeding the call from Indigenous nations/peoples for reconciliation that asks all settler people and communities in Canada to resist colonial discourses of white possessiveness and settler exceptionalism (i.e., home and native land), and to recognize Indigenous sovereignty and relational lifeways in situated, intersectional, and shared places (i.e., home on native land). The idea of Indigenous sovereignty is not one of ownership or possession over the Land, but recognizing that Indigenous nations/peoples have deep, multifaceted, and complex relations in storied places and traditional territories. Therefore, to engage in and maintain good relations means to work towards an ethic of non-interference, non-possessiveness, and self-determination that affirms consensual and co-constitutive relations between settler communities and Indigenous nations/peoples. To build a better home on native land is to move beyond encounters towards becoming kin.

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### 1

The term “native” is used throughout this article to challenge settler colonial discourse in the Canadian national anthem as well as affirm Indigenous sovereignty. Indigenous autonoms are preferred to represent specific nations/peoples, and the term “Indigenous” is used to recognize First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples.

### 2

Alessia Passafiume, “July Black Shares Barrage of Racist, Threatening Messages after National Anthem Lyric Change,” *Toronto Star*, February 27, 2023, [https://](https://www.thestar.com/entertainment/2023/02/27/july-black-shares-barrage-of-racist-threatening-messages-after-national-anthem-lyric-change.html)

[www.thestar.com/entertainment/2023/02/27/july-black-shares-barrage-of-racist-threatening-messages-after-national-anthem-lyric-change.html](https://www.thestar.com/entertainment/2023/02/27/july-black-shares-barrage-of-racist-threatening-messages-after-national-anthem-lyric-change.html).

### 3

“Canadian R&B Singer July Black Honoured at AFN Ceremony for NBA Anthem Rendition,” *Toronto Star*, April 4, 2023, <https://www.thestar.com/entertainment/music/2023/04/04/canadian-rb-singer-july-black-honoured-at-afn-ceremony-for-nba-anthem-rendition.html>.

**4**

Ibid.

**5**

John Paul Tasker, "At Least 6,000 Children Died in Residential Schools, TRC Chair Says," CBC News, May 30, 2015, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/residential-schools-findings-point-to-cultural-genocide-commission-chair-says-1.3093580>; for more information on Indian school policy and the impact of settler colonialism, see The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future*, vol. 1 (Toronto: James Lorimer & Company, 2015). see The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future*, vol. 1 (Toronto: James Lorimer & Company, 2015)

**6**

Holly Honderich and Eloise Alanna, "Why Singer Jully Black Changed One Word in Canada's National Anthem," *BBC News*, February 21, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-64722763>.

**7**

"Canadian R&B Singer."

**8**

David S. Koffman, ed., *No Better Home? Jews, Canada, and the Sense of Belonging* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021), 3.

**9**

For an explication of *wahkotowin*, see Brenda Macdougall, *One of the Family: Métis Culture in Nineteenth-Century Northwestern Saskatchewan* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010); Kim TallBear, "Caretaking Relations, Not American Dreaming," *Kalfou* 6, no. 1 (2019): 37, <https://doi.org/10.15367/kf.v6i1.228>.

**10**

Jennifer Adese and Chris Andersen, eds., *A People and a Nation: New Directions in Contemporary Métis Studies* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2021).

**11**

David S. Koffman, "The Unsettling of Canadian Jewish History: Toward a Tangled History of Jewish-Indigenous Encounters," in *No Better Home?*

**12**

Ibid., 94.

**13**

Ibid.; see also Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1-40, <https://doi.org/10.25058/20112742.n38.04>.

**14**

Koffman, "The Unsettling of Canadian Jewish History," 91, 102.

**15**

Ibid., 103.

**16**

See Brendan Hokowhitu et al., eds., *Routledge Handbook of Critical Indigenous Studies* (Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2021).

**17**

TallBear, "Caretaking Relations," 24.

**18**

Koffman, "The Unsettling of Canadian Jewish History," 104.