



## **Métis-Astute Social Work: Shining the light on some helpful practices**

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### **Abstract**

Canada's Truth and Reconciliation process highlighted the need for improvements in the child welfare system in regards to serving Indigenous families. Structurally, Métis children are both unrecognized and over-represented in provincial child welfare systems across Canada. In addition, Métis people are disproportionately likely to experience health and social problems leading to social work involvement for reasons of perceived neglect or poverty. As we move forward, it is crucial that social work practice attends to these complex issues and helps families construct life-solutions based on Métis values and aspirations. This article addresses social work practice with Métis families by exploring factors that contribute to Métis well-being and helpful social work approaches while also offering a critique of practices which further marginalize Métis families. This article is intended to inform social work with Métis families by offering an approach to helping which may be considered nurturing, supportive, empowering and non-colonizing. There may be relevance also for social work with First Nations and Inuit communities although it is the differences that compel this article to address Métis-specific issues. This article also explores issues of Métis identification, identity, and social work practices which dignify, rather than further alienate Métis families. In other words this article outlines what is referred to as Métis-astute practice.

### **INTRODUCTION**

I write this paper on the Indigenous lands of the Kanien'kehá:ka Nations, in Tiohtiá:ke/Montreal, a historical gathering place for many First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples. In writing this paper I acknowledge the Elders, past and present, and the ongoing relationships with the many Indigenous peoples in the Montreal community today. The focus of this paper is social work practice with Métis families that is empowering, liberating, supportive, and strengthening. Certainly, colonial-style approaches to social work with Métis families have been well documented and have caused ongoing suffering (Bourrassa 2012; Carriere & Richardson, 2017, 2013; Carriere

2011; Fast 2014; Richardson & Wade 2012). Diversity authors Collins & Arthur (2007) state that these approaches consisted of social control and deliberate social engineering. Much of the current therapeutic [and social work] discourse is western European in its orientation and its authors seldom highlight the different ways that Indigenous people have lived, suffered, and been deliberately attacked by the state.

In Canada we should have moved beyond the top-down, non-collaborative approaches to social work by now - particularly with Indigenous peoples and particularly in the aftermath of recent recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation report. However, there are some positive examples of new approaches in other former British colonies, such as New South Wales, Australia. Their recently released child welfare framework document contains the words: “We are deeply sorry about the impact of the stolen generations. Being sorry means we are committed to not repeating past injustices,” (NSW FCA, 2017, p. 6). I believe these words are indicative of an important acknowledgement and new start to transcending colonial social work practice. This article is oriented towards non-Métis social workers who may benefit from knowing a few things about the Métis and Métis aspirations for the care, advocacy and uplifting through social work. This may be particularly helpful in the province of Quebec where understandings about the Métis are confused and minimal and where any mixed-race Indigenous child is identified as “Métisse” (Fast, 2014; Gaudry & Leroux, 2017). If the cultural quality of social work is so low, uninformed, or irrelevant the profession has little to offer Métis families other than social control. History shows that even when Métis children have been removed from challenging family circumstances, they are often made vulnerable in foster and group homes and state placements. Increasingly, research shows that children in the government system have increased rates for disappearance, being recruited and targeted violently in the so-called “sex trade”<sup>1</sup>; they also suicide at rates higher than the general population, especially Indigenous young men. In a world where structural inequalities limit health, opportunities, and full engagement for Métis families a

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<sup>1</sup> It is inaccurate to use the term “sex” (e.g. mutual, consensual, with adults) when the exchange is violence (e.g. child rape, child predation, sexualized debasement and humiliation of children).

<sup>2</sup> You can also use flour sacks, as did my grandma Evelyn.

<sup>3</sup> I do not elaborate on who the Métis are or definitions/descriptions of Métisisms. This has been outlined, at length, in a debate about the broadness or exclusivity of the category. This topic has

quality social work practice would further the cause of raising awareness about the Métis, accord rights and acknowledge the presence, contribution, and sovereignty claims of Métis people in Canada. As in much of my work, I see human dignity as foundational in working across difference in a way that not only transcends the promise of “do not harm” and instead uplifts and dignifies Métis families. This is what I call “Métis-astute” social work practice.

When I refer to “Métis-astute social work practice,” I mean acknowledging the concerns and choices held by many Métis families related to historical colonialism. This means understanding the risks and dynamics of being placed “in-between” mainstream Canadian and First Nation worlds, and falling through the systemic cracks. This term refers to issues of identification and identity, understanding that the terrain for Métis people in Canada is full of potholes and pitfalls, and that the Métis make careful decisions about when and how to identify, knowing that they will often be misunderstood by others. For example, if identifying means that Métis families will receive adequately funded, culturally centered, and respectful social work services then public identification is more likely. I once asked my son why he didn’t identify as Métis in his high school. He told me that if he did, they would put him in a class where he would have to make tipis out of popsicle sticks. Once you identify, the Métis become vulnerable to other people’s projections about who and what is Métis. If identifying means we are then stereotyped and stigmatized as non-specific Aboriginal people we are at risk of being placed into either assimilationist or pan-Aboriginal services, particularly when child protection services are implicated. This can be alleviated by attending to Métis cultural safety through the steps outlined across contexts in a recent journal edited by Blanchet-Cohen and Richardson (2017).

### **SELF-LOCATION**

I am a Métis woman with Cree, Dene, and Gwichin ancestry on my mother’s side. My mother, grandmother and great-grandmother were born in Fort Chipewyan, a fur-trading community comprised of Métis, Cree and Chipewyan families. I was born in Nanaimo, B.C. on Vancouver Island, where my parents re-located after meeting each other at the University of British Columbia after completing each a degree in pharmacy.

They moved to Nanaimo and settled into a middle-class married lifestyle in a community where racism was common and First Nation people were segregated. When I was hospitalized for my first major health challenge at the age of one, I was sent to the white Toronto's children's hospital because my dad was English. I was not confined to the Nanaimo Indian hospital like many other local Aboriginal children. While I identify as Métis, my mother did not have that word available to her in her youth. She was called a "halfbreed," a word often preceded with an insult and a reality that my grandmother tried to hide by using various other identities. Growing up, I knew that my mom, my sister, and I were different "sort" than my dad and the other locals. In the discourse of the day we were "part Native" but that was not spoken about out loud. In the 1800s and early 1900s, the Métis referred to themselves as "the people", meaning not First Nation and not White (Richardson, 2006). Obviously, since the time of the struggles lead by Louis Riel, we have known who we are, but the Canadian public have had difficulty understanding the place of the Métis in Canada, historically and currently.

I have lived the embodied experience of being a "northern person" who has never lived in the north. However, that landscape lives in my bones. After my mom and her family lived in Uranium City Saskatchewan between 1952-1957, the mining industry became part of my bodily/corporal experience. The U.S. military were active in Canada's north, preparing for war(s), fueling the Manhattan Project's thirst for uranium and scouring the north for resources (Harding, 2007; LaDuke, 2009). Assisting them were companies in villages such as Uranium City, Saskatchewan, as well as Port Radium and Deline, NWT. These communities were invited to participate in the extraction of uranium in similar ways to the invitation to current northern oil/gas extraction opportunities. As shown in the film "Village of Widows," Dene men died after carrying sacks of uranium to the boats with their bare hands (Obomsowin, 1999). It was the black rock extracted from this area that was used to unleash mass destruction on Japan in the form of atomic warfare. My grandmother used uranium rocks to line her flowerbed; my grandfather kept these radioactive rocks in the basement. "The terrible legacy of Hiroshima will live long into the future in the human genes. We now understand that radiation damage can skip generations," (Obomsowin, 1999). My Métis family was exposed to radiation. This played out with my grandmother losing her hair, familial intolerance to heavy metals,

food allergies, and cancer. Thus, part of Métis-astute social work practice is to acknowledge and contest the social material conditions, such as the environmental pollution that threatens many of the individuals living in northern communities, including the Métis.



*Fig. 1: Photo of Cathy's kokum Evelyn Oak with daughters Ingebord, Patricia and Greta (mother) on their trapline in NWT.*

My own family has lived with multiple health issues. Our girl babies have been born with joint and hip problems. I was unable to walk and have since had four hip operations and cancer. Intersectionally, I could be seen as a disabled, middle-class Métis mother, and urban Aboriginal. As such, allies to the Métis assist in speaking out against earth exploitation and mining/oil and gas extraction that endangers communities and the environment. Anti-nuclear activist Helen Caldicott writes, “uranium mining in Saskatchewan... involved the devastation of Aboriginal rights, and how government and private corporations cajoled and bribed northerners facing severe unemployment and poverty with “jobs at any cost.” (Caldicott, cited in Harding, 2007, p. 10). Even today, the young Cree of Eeyou Istchee northern Quebec are walking to Montreal to protest

uranium mining on their lands and the devastation that ensues (Nepton, 2014). Creating safety for children includes addressing companies that knowingly contaminate water supplies, birds, animals, and the Earth.



*Fig. 2: Photo of Evelyn Oak*      *Fig. 3: Photo of Cathy Richardson, wearing a body cast*

## HELPFUL PRACTICES

After successfully identifying Métis children who come to the attention of social workers and implementing practices of cultural safety, working with an anti-oppressive approach (AOP) is a good starting point. AOP is more about respecting the location of each person and aspiring to be helpful to them from wherever they stand. “AOP (Anti-Oppressive Practice) means “a way of life’ – a way of life that values the sacred and traditional teachings of various Indigenous cultures,” (Qwul’sih’yah’maht & Kondoquk, 2007, p. 91). One way to understand the Métis is by our kinship ties. Métis author Rob Hancock (2017) describes the nature of kinship ties in Carriere & Richardson (2017). Looking to Métis extended families to care temporarily for children helps these children to stay connected to their shared history involving Métis culture and pride in the ongoing resistance to attacks against our people. Anti-oppressive social work is offered involving critical social theory which problematizes oppressive state functioning and elitist social policy. Social work can also include an emphasis on clinical counseling and, increasingly, offer a focus on working with Indigenous individuals and families in ways

that are holistic, and family or community centered. In some discourses the term social work has been narrowed to refer to child protection, a specialized area with a child-centered mandate. This can be generalized or Indigenous-focused, but ethically speaking child protection should involve contextualized understandings of colonialism and the ongoing oppression of Indigenous individuals and families. Aboriginal protection is the site where the power of the state bears down on the Indigenous mother in a fight over who will raise her children.

In Richardson & Wade (2008), we state:

Child protection social work is an orchestrated social response to children who have been harmed or put at risk by one or more forms of violence. It is also the point at which the power of the state meets some of the most oppressed and marginalized members of the community. It follows that careful analysis of violence and oppression, from minor affronts to dignity to extreme and protracted forms of abuse, must be central to the theory and practice of child protection work. Where Indigenous families are concerned, it is particularly important to expose the functional links between the diverse forms of violence and oppression. In Canada, for example, the theft of Indigenous land on the prairies displaced Indigenous peoples from their territories, disrupted most traditional ways of living and caused the breakdown of local communities. The communities were less able to protect young women, some of whom fled to urban centres to avoid violence and poverty, there to become socially isolated and exposed to further violence. The government and corporations benefitted from the destabilizing of communities to access land and accrue massive wealth (Adams 1989; Churchill, 1993; Harris 2002; O’Keefe & MacDonald 2001). Thus, colonialism is implicated directly in the many current forms of interpersonal violence.

Surprisingly, there are still some social work education programs which do not analyze colonial violence and these functional links which create risk for Indigenous children in the broader context where child abuse may occur. My practice, integrating response-based work social work in the context of Métis and First Nation family serving organizations has lead me to believe that applications of certain western ideas have been applied, inappropriately, to Indigenous populations and used to further removals of Indigenous children.

For example, the concept of “Failure to Protect” is applied by social workers to hold mothers accountable for the violence of their male partner; typically the children are removed from the mother because she “failed to protect them,” (Strega et al, 2012). This

type of victim-blaming practice goes against the philosophy of anti-oppressive, critical social work and Indigenous-centered practice. While Strega and co-authors (2012) problematized such policies in their book, this orientation to child protection has recently become even further entrenched in British Columbia law, along with laws which compel professionals to report mothers when they leave transition houses with their children to return to their home. Society's inability to restrain violent fathers means that we are ever-increasingly punishing women for the behaviour of men and taking their children from them. Similarly, there are many western-developed theories that are applied to Métis families that have not been proven helpful. I consider it a form of violence to impose culturally inappropriate approaches - particularly those that tend to individualize and separate people from loved ones. The Children's Advocate of Manitoba reported 74 deaths of children in care between 2010 and 2016. It is likely that some of these children were Métis. These numbers indicate that, even today, a number of the foster care placements are not safe for children. Sadly, there is little media coverage, let alone political outrage about these deaths.

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF IDENTITY

When I was a child, there was a family day celebration in a local park. My mother helped me and my next-door neighbor Norah to prepare our costumes for a dress-up contest. I didn't realize it at the time, but my mom was doing what her mother had done on the trap line, she made us little dresses out of burlap sacks.<sup>2</sup> She painted our faces with the red lines of a warrior and helped us make headdresses out of construction paper, each with a couple coloured feathers. We looked great! Norah was Scandinavian, with her platinum blond hair, and I was proudly Métis. But today, we were both "Indians!" Later in the park, after various games and activities, we waited for the judging to begin. Awkwardly, I found myself in a bad spot because my bladder was very full and I needed to find a bathroom. I debated painstakingly whether I could wait until after the Judge's decisions or whether I should go quickly. I decided to run swiftly as possible to find relief. When I returned, people were applauding and Norah had just won first place for the best Indian! I had missed it all and was devastated.

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<sup>2</sup> You can also use flour sacks, as did my grandma Evelyn.



That day I learned a painful lesson about identity. It didn't seem to matter that I was a "real" Native person, Norah had won the prize and her family was from Norway. It didn't seem fair. I seem to remember my mom trying to help me sort this out emotionally. She told me that I had had the best costume that day and that I would have won if my bladder hadn't called me away. This was the kind of thing she told me later when my parents wouldn't let me enter a beauty pageant (they were protecting me from some form of exploitation and public display). My mom told me I would have won it. But she was also aware of the hazards of being Métis, or "Native", or "part Native."<sup>3</sup> Aboriginal girls were not romanticized in the world of the beauty contest. In 1978, the Miss Canada pageant was still referred to as "The Miss Dominion of Canada," in a country that worked diligently to hide its violent colonizing origins. The Métis weren't recognized in the Canadian constitution until 1982 so before that we were all seen as "the Natives." My parents were probably protecting me because they knew the risks for a Métis girl in the public eye.

My mother and grandmother knew the difficulties of negotiating the different worlds and social spaces (Richardson, 2012; 2004). You never know if you will be welcomed, valued, or cast out. When my mom went to the University of British Columbia in 1958 she didn't tell anyone she was Métis. Her mother had warned her against it. It is unlikely that she was the only Métis person in university in Canada at that time, but her participation certainly wasn't celebrated. She said she wore white pancake make-up on her face to cover her dark skin; she also had to stay out of the sun. When my daughter went to a prestigious high school, they wouldn't give her an Indigenous bursary because she didn't have status and they didn't know what to make of Métis students. She did, however, get searched at the border twice when she went to Mexico. Social and political oppression accompany identifying as Métis in Canada (Carriere & Richardson, 2017; Fast, 2014; Laliberté, 2013; McCaffrey, 2010; Richardson, 2016; 2006; 2004; Turner, 2012). They are also unsettling, confusing and often hurtful. Logan (2001)

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<sup>3</sup> I do not elaborate on who the Métis are or definitions/descriptions of Métisisms. This has been outlined, at length, in a debate about the broadness or exclusivity of the category. This topic has been outlined in earlier papers by myself, by writers such as Jeannine Carriere, Elizabeth Fast, Carrie Bourassa, Deb Canada, Chris Andersen, Rob Hancock, David Chartrand Adam Gaudry and many others.

showed us that the Métis historically were denied education in various contexts but were placed in residential schools (e.g. Canada's prison camps for Indigenous children) when there weren't enough First Nation children to fill the seats. It was inevitably a fiscal decision, not an ethical one. In Canada, keeping Indigenous people out of systems means there are more seats for others who are considered "more worthy" in the context of racism (Henry & Tator 2010). Thomas King (2003), in *The Truth About Stories* asks the question to the dominant society "What is it about us that you don't like?" (p. 121). I think this "convenient dislike" supported the industries of land appropriation and resource extraction, a convenient rationalization to remove Indigenous peoples from the land and vice versa.

### **HELPFUL PRACTICES WHEN WORKING WITH MÉTIS CHILDREN AND FAMILIES**

Recently, in New South Wales Australia, the Department of Family and Community Services adopted a progressive framework for child welfare. They organize their work around "justice-doing", "dignity-giving", and "family seeing". Some of the framework was based on the contributions of Canadians such as Vikki Reynolds (2016) and the Centre for Response-Based Practice as well as their own practice leaders and with input from local Indigenous communities (NSW FCA, 2017). Their "Practice First" Principles are listed as the following: 1. Culture is ever-present; 2. Language impacts on practice; 3. Relationships create change and restore dignity; 4. Critique leads to improved practice; and, 5. Ethics and values are integral to good practice (p. 6). Within their framework they vow to work with Indigenous communities and say, "we are deeply sorry about the impact of the Stolen Generations. Being sorry means we are committed to making sure we do not repeat past injustices." (p.8). In the Canadian context, child protection social workers could implement particular local culturally centered practices to promote positive outcomes for Métis children and families. I believe the following practices could be helpful: Justice doing, Dignity-giving & Restorative practices, and understanding the importance of accurate language & accounts of resistance to oppression.

### **JUSTICE-DOING**

This concept relates to the embedding of social justice principles into social work interventions. One question that workers could study is, “how does my intervention have “overflowing” positive impacts for the community”. Each intervention could be aligned with a community-development orientation - increasing skill, resources, and infrastructure for community-based services and practices.

#### DIGNITY-GIVING & RESTORATIVE PRACTICE

Upholding human dignity is a central aspect of response-based practice. It is based on the understanding that colonial violence and earlier violations, state intrusions, and injustice have been humiliating for Métis communities and individuals (McCaffrey, 2010; Richardson, 2017). For example, the violent land left of Métis lands by the federal government in both 1869 and 1885 left years of hardship and racism against the Métis who tried to protect their land-base from John MacDonald’s invasion. These years, preceded by the federal government withholding money for Métis wheat involved deliberate attempts to starve the Métis into submission in what historian Howard Adams called “a prison of grass,” (Adams, 1989). Dignity based practices are organized around restoring dignity through addressing past humiliations and reversing the strategies of colonization. For example, colonial violence involved processes of separation and isolation; therefore, present-day social work practices need to be based on reducing isolation and reconnecting children with their family, community, lands and culture. No one can “fill the spirit” of a Métis child, and help to build a strong sense of pride and identity than being with loving members of community. Others can provide kindness, but they cannot provide the deep sense of belonging that children need to feel they have a place in the world. The connection to land cannot be experienced by watching films or playing electronic games in a house.<sup>4</sup>

Dignity-giving also relates to co-creating cultural safety, transforming mainstream office spaces into places exuding cultural warmth and welcome. It means doing some of the meetings outside or in community spaces that are both safe and protecting client privacy but that are also reflective of local culture. When social workers can bring

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<sup>4</sup> My experience doing social work in Victoria, BC taught me that many children in foster care were medicated and placed in front of tv or video-games to keep them busy.

something to eat together with the family, a more supportive, caring exchange can be created. It also means sharing local and land-based foods, not just those in plastic packaging from Costco. Social workers do not have to be perfect but can organize interventions in alignment with the integrity of local land and culture. For example, talking to a child while picking berries with children could be considered a Métis-astute intervention. Helping to prepare Indigenous communities for sovereignty is also an ethical social work practice by working in conjunction with community-based helpers.

#### UNDERSTANDING THE IMPORTANCE OF ACCURATE LANGUAGE & ACCOUNTS OF RESISTANCE TO OPPRESSION

There are so many aspects to proficient language-use in social work. One is to include the histories of resistance in the larger account or narrative of the family's life (Richardson & Wade, 2012). In understanding or mapping out the family's responses to adversity and challenge, one gets a clearer view of capacity, pre-existing ability, and safety knowledge. This information can then overshadow the typical Euro-centric, deficit-based psychological constructions which tend to be placed in the centre of the risk analysis. For example, top-down social work practitioners would see the fact that someone experienced violence in the past as indicative of future violence use, an assumption which is faulty and irresponsible<sup>5</sup>. Or, typical European-style attachment theories tend to blame mothers and overlook traditional kinship ties and multi-directional relationships of care and connection (Carriere & Richardson, 2009; Mann-Johnson, 2016; Neckaway et al, 2007). "Connection" and re-connection are the key words in the stabilizing of Métis children in child welfare practice.

#### AN INVITATION TO SOCIAL WORKERS

Can we in the social work field move beyond an individualizing, child-centered mandate that separates children from family and culture in order to uphold Métis values

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<sup>5</sup> The evidence shows that whether or not a person will go on to use violence is based on the kind of response they received at the time of disclosure, and after. Is they received helpful positive responses, they are unlikely to use violence as a tool (Richardson & Wade, 2008). Yet, this deterministic projection was used to assess risk on many risk assessment tools in Canada, discriminating against violence survivors.

and sacred concerns? Among these concerns are cultural identity, family integrity, and values such as love, respect, inter-relationship, community, spirituality, and Mother Earth. Dignity is central to respectful interaction and practice. Sadly, humiliation constitutes a large aspect the harm and mistreatment a person may experience. Are social workers inspired and supported to work together to redress the historical humiliation (of the Métis) through offering a collective positive response. We can expand the child-focused mandate to include a more collectivist, family-oriented/Earth-oriented vision for reasons related to best practice and decolonization. We can find alternative, community-run services that do not carry the colonial legacy and culture of misinformation in their institutional past. And, both social workers and families have to grapple with hard questions like how to be helpful to Métis parents when they are emotionally or physically unable to parent. This consists of asking the question, “How can we (collectively) support parents who are struggling to parent their children” without furthering their humiliation with the message “you are bad parents”? It seems, at the very least, that this approach may address the integrity of family life as well as addressing aspirations for decolonization and social justice. Social workers are taught to analyze poverty, violence, and inequalities but can they, within current structures, alleviate these aspects of global capitalism? This is part of the agenda of anti-oppressive practice and, I believe, an important aspect of Indigenous sovereignty. Our social and political agenda for social services should be aimed at reducing the numbers of Métis/Indigenous children that are being removed from their families while offering justice, support and strengthening to family units. This will necessarily involve contesting aspects of impoverization, exploitive capitalism, and attending to climate change and our current ecological crisis.

To conclude, I believe that Métis social work is a particular kind of engagement that involves holding the well-being and dignity of the Métis children and adults within a larger ecological circle. The integrity of that circle is supported by the intersecting and inherent rights of the Métis to self-governance, to their land, and to the understanding that the state does not own Métis children. While it is in Canada’s best interest to structure safety and security for Métis children, it is the Métis nation and the Métis community who can best perform that task. Through their political entities, the Métis can develop their desired social work outcomes, in consultation with community, and engage social

workers to fulfill these aspirations. As such, the sanctity of women as life-bearers and the collectivist affinities of the Métis people are more likely to be respected. And, particular support can be offered to families who have been directed into industrial and dangerous occupations which serve the interests of capital and compromise the well-being of Métis workers and Mother Earth. Doing this requires political will in the dominant culture as well as social work education that prepares willing students for this complexity. And similar to other occupations, particular competencies must be met before non-Métis social workers receive permission to engage with Métis families.

The current system is not working well and indicators point to the reality that things may actually be worsening. Examining the many pressures and limited options for many Métis families within the current social and industrial landscape, it feels apt to conclude the article with a Cree prophecy offered as a blessing to Métis families:

When all the trees have been cut down,  
When all the animals have been hunted,  
When all the waters are polluted,  
When all the air is unsafe to breathe,  
Only then will they discover you cannot eat money.

While various paths lay in front of us, one of those paths leads to liberation from oppressive practices and back towards the blessings of family, community and belonging. In this, social workers have an opportunity, and ethical duty, to conceptualize and formulate interventions that elaborate on pre-existing safety and opportunities for care in Métis communities. Every intervention should meet the test of assisting and strengthening not only the individual child, but also the community and the land upon which the child is embraced.

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