How can we know if we’re Canadian? I mean, how can we know what ‘Canadian’ is, unless all of us develop what we have?

Maria Campbell

We are not Canadians.

Taiaiake Alfred

Are you a Canadian citizen? This is the question put to the Métis speaker of Marilyn Dumont’s poem ‘It Crosses My Mind’. The speaker contemplates a job application that solicits a one-word answer to that question and muses,

I sometimes think to answer, yes, by coercion, yes, but no ... there’s more, but no space provided to write my historical interpretation here, that, yes but no, really only means yes because there are no lines for the stories between yes and no. (59)

At heart, this essay attempts to render some ‘lines’ for a short story that speaks to the ‘yes, but no’ of Indigenous citizenship. That story is Thomas King’s ‘Borders’ (King, One Good Story). My aim is to consider the ways in which ‘Borders’ elucidates the constraints of Canadian citizenship for Indigenous peoples and re-imagines citizenship from an indigenous perspective. Beyond that, I hope to suggest some of the ways in which reading this story can help those of us who study and teach indigenous literatures to answer the question memorably put by Cheryl Suzack: ‘how do we put our commitments to indigenous knowledges in the service of new social movements?’ (1).

My choice of King and of ‘Borders’ is perhaps predictable: ‘Borders’ is widely anthologised and is often referenced in discussions of King’s work and, to a lesser extent, in the growing body of Canadian literary criticism concerned with citizenship practices.1 But the choice of King is also predictable because he is the

1 By way of example, Davidson, Walton, and Andrews devote most of a chapter to ‘Borders’ in their book Border Crossings: Thomas King’s Cultural Inversions. See also New. Although Hulan and Warley’s ‘Comic Relief’ does not focus on ‘Borders’, its argument about King’s use of humour is pertinent.
Carrie Dawson
darling of non-indigenous scholars and teachers of Canadian and postcolonial literatures – people like me. In an essay about indigenous nationalism in Taiaiake Alfred’s writing, Kristina Fagan cites a 2002 survey that represents King’s Green Grass, Running Water as the most frequently-taught novel in university-level Canadian literature classes, and argues that the book’s playful ‘allusions to and subversions of Western popular and political culture’ make it appealing to the majority of Can Lit scholars who, she suggests, tend to approach indigenous literatures through the lenses of culture and colonialism, who stand at the front of the room talking about tricksters but who are unlikely to foreground manifestly political questions of land ownership or support Indigenous peoples’ claims to self-determination when those claims have material consequences (15). Fagan’s point about the prevalence and the shortcomings of what she calls ‘culturalist’ approaches to indigenous literatures is well-taken, even urgent, and I share her sense that we need to introduce our students to a wide range of indigenous writing, including that which does not tend to be published by mainstream presses because it is understood to be too political and only marginally literary. That said, we do King a disservice if we put his work in the other camp, the cosmopolitan camp, and understand it as privileging discursive play over political efficacy. Doing so allows us to let ourselves off the hook for readings that divide indigenous culture from indigenous politics, or that focus on the former at the expense of the latter. It also underestimates and undermines the political impetus of his work.

In Canada, King has garnered popular attention for his achievements as a radio broadcaster, screenwriter, photographer, academic, and politician, but he is best known as a writer. He has twice been nominated for the Governor-General’s Award, one of the country’s top literary prizes, and, in 2004, Green Grass, Running Water was a finalist in CBC’s ‘Canada Reads’ contest, which aims to choose ‘the book for Canada to read this year’ (‘Canada Reads’). In 1999 Canadian Literature devoted an entire issue to King. Since then, his novels and short stories have been the subject of one scholarly book (the first full-length monograph to be published in Canada on a single Indigenous author) and numerous essays, book chapters, and dissertations. It is, therefore, interesting that King’s fiction receives no mention in Métis scholar Jo-Ann Episkenew’s Taking Back Our Spirits (2009), a study of contemporary Indigenous literature that foregrounds the effects of Canadian public policies on Indigenous peoples. Though she says little about her reasons for foregrounding particular writers and excluding others, Episkenew stresses her interest in writing that serves ‘a socio-pedagogical function as well as an aesthetic one’: ‘Based on the premise that an enlightened population will demand equitable

2 In a review of Border Crossings, Sophie McCall suggests the shortcomings of a ‘culturalist’ approach to indigenous literatures when she points out that the authors’ emphasis on cultural ‘inversion’ and “talking back” to a dominant discourse unwittingly represents King as being ‘caught in a conversation that always returns to the master narrative’ (209).

and effective public policy’, she argues that ‘this socio-pedagogical function of Indigenous literature promotes social justice for Indigenous people, perhaps more effectively than political rhetoric’ (193). Because I think that Episkenew is right about the transformative power of Indigenous literature, I mean to take her exclusion of King as a challenge and an opportunity to demonstrate the ways in which ‘Borders’ promotes social justice.

‘Borders’ is about a Blackfoot woman and her son who attempt to drive from their home in southern Alberta to Salt Lake City, Utah, but are detained at the Canada-US border because the woman refuses to identify as either Canadian or American, choosing instead to identify as Blackfoot. The guards are stymied. The first blinks a few times before repeating his request that she declare her citizenship. A second guard gets nowhere when she reasons that ‘Everyone who crosses our border has to declare their citizenship. Even Americans’ (136). A third, skilled in the rhetoric of Canadian cultural diversity, says, ‘I’d be proud of being Blackfoot if I were Blackfoot. But you have to be American or Canadian’ (138–39). She, too, is met with silence. The racially unmarked guards are neither aggressive nor overtly hostile, but they pat their guns rather a lot, and they strut and sway like ‘cowboys headed for a bar or a gunfight’ (135), suggesting the extent to which their scripted demands for a declaration of federal citizenship ask ‘Aboriginal peoples to comply with colonial narratives posing as modernity’ (Henderson, ‘Sui Generis’ 416). Most obviously, those demands obviate the history of a people whose communal identities, land claims, and citizenship practices thrived long before North American forms of governance and citizenship were established. Equally important, the either/or dilemma presented to the Blackfoot woman cannot be understood outside of the Canadian history of indigenous enfranchisement, which allowed that Indigenous people could only acquire full British subject status and later Canadian citizenship by relinquishing their Indian status.4 Thus Sakej Henderson, Director of the Native Law Center of Canada, argues that although the federal government’s attempts to legislate Indians out of existence through the conditions of enfranchisement failed, the history of enfranchisement has made the question of Canadian citizenship a very vexed one for Indigenous peoples, many of whom understand today’s avowedly egalitarian but ultimately inflexible prescription of undifferentiated citizenship as the legacy of colonialist federal policies designed ‘to restrict the constitutional rights of Aboriginal peoples of Canada and make them formally equal to other Canadian citizens’ (‘Sui Generis’ 416).

In 1996, less than three years after the publication of ‘Borders’, the Canadian government’s Final Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples came to a similar conclusion about the colonial underpinnings of citizenship: it recommends that Canada recognise Indigenous peoples as enjoying a unique dual citizenship, and that the country ensure that Canadian passports of Indigenous

4 In 1947, when Canada introduced the statute creating Canadian citizenship, Indians could not become citizens unless they were enfranchised because unenfranchised Indians were not considered ‘persons’ under Canadian federal law until 1951.
citizens explicitly recognise this dual citizenship by identifying the Indigenous nationality of the passport carrier. But at the time of writing this has not yet happened, and contemporary Customs and Immigration practices do not for the most part recognise Indigenous peoples’ ‘free passage’, though this right was guaranteed under the Jay Treaty signed by Britain and the US in 1794. For all these reasons, Indigenous scholars, activists, and authors are arguing for state recognition of a *sui generis* form of Indigenous citizenship. This is true of Sakej Henderson and it is true of the mother in King’s story, but where Henderson approaches the question of Indigenous citizenship through the lenses of law and governance, King approaches it through his depiction of place.

Not surprisingly, references to the Canada-US border tend to be oblique in King’s story: asked if she is Blackfoot from the Canadian or American side, the mother will only say that she is from ‘the Blackfoot side’ and another character is said to have ‘moved across the line’ (131). In place of ‘that line’, which he elsewhere characterises as ‘a figment of somebody else’s imagination’ (*Truth* 102), King offers the Milk River watershed as a marker of difference. Taken together, the story’s many references to water, and more particularly to the mother’s peevish but not incorrect contention that the water is different south of Coutts (a border town), posit the watershed, the high ridge of land from which the Milk River divides and flows north through the Saskatchewan River to Hudson’s Bay or south into the Missouri River system, as a geographically more logical and more natural marker of difference than the existing border.

‘The border’, writes King, ‘was actually two towns, though neither one was big enough to amount to anything’ (133). Accordingly, William H. New suggests that King’s border is ‘less a place, a ribbon, a line, than a process – a set of names, distances, and durations’ (28). There is good reason for this because, in the late nineteenth century, both the Canadian and American states sought to establish a linear boundary ‘unequivocally separating one nation and all its supposedly defining characteristics from another’, but what they got instead was ‘a “zonal” border’, a region characterised by interconnected communities, economies, and ecologies that could not be easily divided (McManus xii). Crucially, Blackfoot mobility undermined the meaningfulness of the border, so limiting the movement of Blackfoot living in the borderlands was central to political attempts to achieve

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5 For a discussion of the annual border-crossing marches commemorating the right of free passage see Choi. Also see Burns, who points out that in Akwesasne, a reserve that overlaps the borders of Ontario, Quebec, and New York, residents are subjected to cross-border inspection on an almost daily basis. On a more positive note, the Iroquois Caucus website suggests that the Six Nations have made some progress in their attempts to get the Canadian and American governments to agree to recognise a proposed Iroquois Caucus card as an acceptable piece of identification for the purposes of border crossing: see ‘Update – Border Crossing, August 6th, 2008’ (www.sixnations.ca/BCUpdateAug2008.pdf).

6 *Sui generis* translates roughly as entirely unique or of its own kind. In ‘Aboriginal and Treaty Rights and Tribunals’ Henderson argues that, because ‘ordinary Canadian legal analysis and reasoning have not been appropriate to the task of Aboriginal rights or their proper place in Confederation ... what is needed instead is a truly *sui generis* analysis that honours their uniqueness and their anchorage in Aboriginal forms of order and jurisprudence’ (‘Aboriginal’ 10).
that division. In Canada this involved the introduction in 1885 of a vociferously contested but largely unsuccessful pass system requiring Blackfoot to get written permission from the local Indian Agent when leaving the reserve; it also involved the expropriation of reserve land near the border, and the establishment of a *cordon sanitaire* around that land. At the same time, Canadian and American governments were working hard to settle the borderlands with whites whose lifestyles and land-holding practices were seen to reinforce the larger nation-making project. Mormons, who were renowned for their agricultural prowess and large families – and who were fleeing religious persecution in the US – were one of the groups welcomed to Alberta in the 1890s. They established themselves near the Blackfoot reserve because of their plans to do missionary work among the Blackfoot, whom they understood to be particularly ripe for conversion. This matters because ‘Borders’ contains numerous references to Mormonism and to Mormon settlements in southern Alberta. Indeed, the mother and son’s road trip to Salt Lake City – ironically posited as a promised land of sorts – is imagined as a kind of colonisation in reverse, and the references to the Mormon presence in southern Alberta invoke the long history of federal policies and practices that limited Blackfoot mobility, refused Blackfoot sovereignty, and expropriated Blackfoot land.

Eventually the mother in King’s story gets her way and is allowed to cross the border on her own terms. Significantly, though, the guard who lets them pass is convinced not by the mother’s righteousness nor her persistence but by the appearance of the television news media, whom she summons and effectively directs:

> Television vans began to arrive, and guys in suits and women in dresses came trotting over to us, dragging microphones and cameras and lights behind them ...

They mostly talked to my mother. Every so often one of the reporters would come over and ask me questions about how it felt to be an Indian without a country. I told them we had a nice house and that my cousins had a couple of horses we rode when we went fishing. Some of the television people went over to the American border, and then they went to the Canadian border.

Around noon, a good-looking guy in a dark blue suit and an orange tie with little ducks on it drove up in a fancy car. He talked to my mother for a while, and, after they were done talking, my mother called me over, and we got into our car. (142–43)

Faced with the glare of television lights, the border guard who approaches their car is ‘all smiles’(143). When the mother declares her citizenship to be Blackfoot, he ‘jammed his thumbs into his gun belt, ... his fingers patting the butt of the revolver’, and said, “Have a pleasant trip” (144). Meanwhile the reporters and television people, caught up in the romance of the carefully packaged made-for-tv drama that they have helped to produce, run alongside the car waving.
The reporters are quick to recognise the symbolic power of indigeneity and they marshal it to tell a slickly produced story about an ‘Indian without a country’. In direct contrast to that story, King offers the stories that the mother tells her son on the previous night: while camped in the no-man’s land of a parking lot that is attached to a duty-free store, the mother leans back against the car, looks at the stars, and begins to tell her son Creation stories that her grandmother had told her. ‘She was serious about it, too. She’d tell them slow, repeating parts as she went, as if she expected me to remember each one’ (142). As King contrasts the blinding glare of tv lights with the muted glow of the stars, he also contrasts the careful pedagogy underlying the mother’s repetition of Creation stories with the synchronous repetition of the quickly forgotten news story on tv sets across North America, and with the hollowness of the guards’ repeated demands that she comply with the narrative of federal citizenship. That said, the stories that the mother tells her son are like the scripts followed by the guards and the news item crafted by the reporters in that they, too, are citizenship stories — understood in the context of the mother’s ongoing struggle to win federal recognition of her Blackfoot citizenship, the stories that she teaches her son represent an invitation to participate in an alternative, *sui generis* form of citizenship, one which posits an ecological form of belonging rooted in an understanding of kinship, history and culture. So, if the act of stargazing is about the apprehension of a borderless world in King’s story, it is also about learning a culturally particular and manifestly political response to the world, what Henderson calls a ‘terrestrial consciousness’ (*Sui Generis* 432). According to Henderson, such a sense ‘of belonging to a land, a people, and a family unfolds an alternative vision of society and citizenship. It accentuates relationships — in particular, the responsibilities among families, clans, communities, and nations to a particular ecology’ and thus is capable of ‘generating a Canadian sense of belonging’, but one that is ‘found in learning and protecting its diverse ecology rather than in narrowly conceived political or cultural thought’ (*Sui Generis* 432).

In the last line of the story, the mother and son drive away from the border after having successfully crossed it for the second time. The young boy looks out the rear-view mirror and notes that the tops of the flagpoles and the blue water tower, which were introduced into the story as markers of national difference, state authority, and of the theft of Blackfoot land, ‘rolled over a hill and disappeared’ (145). With the phrase ‘rolled over a hill and disappeared’ King reverses the formulation familiar from so many Westerns — wherein the calamitous appearance of Indians from over a hill (as though from nowhere) and their certain disappearance back over a hill (to nowhere) suggests that they have no place in that landscape. In King’s formulation, the victorious Indians are going home and the flagpoles roll over the hill and disappear.

‘America loves Indian culture. America is much less enthusiastic about Indian land title’, says Creek scholar Craig Womack (qtd in Fagan 14). The same is true in Canada. And, too often, it is true in Canadian scholarship about Indigenous literature. We tend to read and teach as culturalists — keen, for example, to
address King's use of the Western as intertext, but less inclined to engage with the argument for sovereignty and self-determination that is implicit in his toppling flagpoles and explicit in his suggestion that both sides of the border are 'the Blackfoot side'. This, in spite of the fact that the story caricatures such a reading in the form of the tv producer and the waving throngs of reporters. If we do not take seriously the story's argument for a *sui generis* Blackfoot citizenship, then we are like the tv producer – the slick white guy who appears to listen to the mother but who then packages and sells her concerns as the glib story of 'an Indian without a country'. And we are like the reporters who run alongside the car, waving and celebrating our own role in arranging the Indians' passage across borders into classrooms and into canons, all the while taking care to describe the car and its contents in easily digested sound bites suitable for large audiences with short attention spans. To do so is to fail to understand 'the ways in which we can perform ourselves as dominant at the same time that we understand ourselves to be engaging in liberatory politics' (Razack 325). It is also to miss the point of the story. And perhaps, most importantly, it is to miss an opportunity. King speaks to that opportunity in *The Truth about Stories*, a collection of stories cum essays first delivered as the 2003 Massey Lectures. Each story ends with a version of the same challenge: ‘Take this story’, he writes.

> It's yours. Do with it what you will. Make it the topic of a discussion group at a scholarly conference. Put it on the Web. Forget it. But don’t say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story ... You’ve heard it now. (60)

And so we have. The question is what do we – we who have ‘taken it’ and used it in our conference papers, classrooms, and essays – plan to do with it? What, if anything, do we mean our readings of this story to do?

In answering these questions I want to draw on a real-life border-crossing story that might help to illuminate the prescience and the utility of King's 'Borders'. It concerns Deskaheh, a Cayuga statesman who, in 1923, used a passport issued by the Six Nations Iroquois Confederacy to travel to Switzerland, where he applied for membership in the League of Nations on behalf of the Six Nations. A renowned orator, Deskaheh spent eighteen months raising awareness about the assimilationist goals of the Canadian government and their encroachment onto Iroquois territory. With the help of the British, the Canadian government eventually succeeded in blocking his bid to get an official audience at the League on the grounds that Deskaheh's grievances were 'entirely of domestic concern' and were a matter 'between the Canadian Government and individuals owing it allegiance' (qtd in Comtassel 110).7 Broke and exhausted, Deskaheh left Europe. He was, however, denied entry to Canada and so went into exile on the Tuscarora Reservation near Buffalo, New York. He died a few months later. Before his death, Deskaheh's family tried to visit him but they were not permitted to enter the United States.

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7 Also see Woo, who argues that the Canadian government's intervention against the Six Nations petition had much to do with its attempt to establish its autonomy in an international arena.
In March 1925 Deskaheh gave one last speech: in a radio broadcast from Rochester, New York, the Chief once again argued that the Six Nations had never accepted British or Canadian sovereignty and that they were not subjects of either country.

Your governments have lately resorted to new practices in their Indian policies. In the old days they often bribed our chiefs to sign treaties to get our lands. Now they know that our remaining territory can be easily gotten away from us by first taking our political rights away in forcing us into your citizenship, so they give jobs in their Indian offices to the bright young people among us who will take them and who, to earn their pay, say that our people wish to become citizens with you and that we are ready to have our tribal life destroyed and want your governments to do it. (152)

Like Sakej Henderson, Deskaheh construed the offer of Canadian citizenship to Indigenous peoples as an ‘invitation to compliance with colonialism and domination’ (Henderson, ‘Sui Generis’ 416). And, like the mother in King’s story, he argued against the legitimacy of the border that he was not permitted to cross by telling a story that, he suggested, was no less true for being a story and no less a story for being true.8

This is a story of the Mohawks, the story of the Oneidas, of the Cayugas – I am a Cayuga – of the Onondagas, the Senecas and the Tuscaroras. They are the Iroquois. Tell it to those who have not been listening. Maybe I will be stopped from telling it. But if I am prevented from telling it over, as I hope to do, the story will not be lost. I have already told it to thousands of listeners in Europe – it has gone into the records where your children can find it when I may be dead or in jail for daring to tell the truth. (154)

Now, more than eighty years after his death, Deskaheh is widely recognised as the first indigenous person to argue for self-determination in an international arena and his ‘story’ has ‘gone into the records’ in ways that might have surprised him. By way of example, it features prominently on the website introducing the United Nations’ Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues; it is cited as a precedent by those who analyse contemporary indigenous rights discourse; and, most importantly for my purposes, it is excerpted in a recent anthology of Canadian literature.9

At a time when indigenous literatures figure prominently on Canadian Literature syllabi, the inclusion of Deskaheh’s ‘Last Speech’ in a literary anthology raises important questions about the extent to which indigenous stories of all kinds are interpreted according to Eurocentric literary standards. Frustrated

8 On the role of story in indigenous cultures, Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm says something similar: ‘For many of us, creative language in written or spoken forms is used, not merely as a form of individual self-expression, but as a form of cultural expression that raises the communal consciousness of the people. We believe in the power of words. Not in the power of legal documents and signatures, but in the power of words’ (171).

with this tendency, Okanagan writer and activist Jeannette Armstrong insists that indigenous literatures are a distinct genre in Canadian literature: beginning with the important contention that ‘Aboriginal literatures, in written form, must first be read as an authentic older, complex, Aboriginal spoken art form’, she argues that they ‘play a different role than contemporary written literatures in the world of market-driven parameters’ (180; 181). On the other hand, Penny van Toorn cautions against assuming that indigenous stories are ‘automatically rendered inauthentic’ when they enter ‘networks of commodity exchange’ (252). In ‘Tactical History Business’, an essay that considers the politics and – ultimately – the benefits of commodifying the stories of Australia’s Stolen Generation, van Toorn makes an argument that has much bearing on the stories told by Deskaheh, King, and his characters.

Beginning with the observation that the government-issued *Bringing Them Home* Report of 1997 (Human Rights), which contained many Aboriginal people’s personal stories of dislocation and abuse, was a ‘surprise best-seller’ (259), van Toorn contends that while sensational media reports and public recognition of the stories’ truth-value made the testimonies valuable as commodities, their status as stories made them dangerous for John Howard’s government, which had already publicly ‘closed the door’ on the Stolen Generations inquiry (van Toorn 260). Because ‘the testimonies marshalled the power, vividness, and moral authority of personal narratives, rather than the scientific authority of document-based historical research’, they summoned an entirely singular and undeniably emotional response from individual readers. On those grounds, Ron Brunton called the Report of which they were a substantial part ‘one of the most intellectually and morally irresponsible official documents produced in recent years’ (qtd in van Toorn 261). The point is that like Deskaheh’s speech, and like both the story that King’s mother tells her son and the story that King presents to his readers, the witnesses’ stories were politically volatile ‘as stories’ (261, emphasis in original). But a story’s efficacy, its power, depends on how it is read, by whom, and in what context. As van Toorn notes, ‘the historical import and political utility of Aboriginal histories can be dispersed and deflected by consumption practices structured around the commodification process’ (254). This is, perhaps, particularly worrisome for a popular and increasingly canonical Indigenous writer like Tom King. So it is not surprising that his stories often reflect on their status as commodities, and ask questions about the ‘market-driven parameters that shape what becomes mass product and define what survives’ (Armstrong 181).

By way of conclusion, I want to consider the ways in which ‘Borders’ addresses the possibilities and pitfalls of commodifying indigenous stories. When the mother and son in King’s story are reunited with their daughter/sister, Laetitia, in Salt Lake City, they visit a diner, and at Laetitia’s request, they repeat the story of their crossing.

10 Van Toorn notes that ‘effectiveness of the testimony as written communication’ figured among the criteria that the Report’s editor and principal drafter used to decide which parts of testimony to use (258).
She took us out to a restaurant that made really good soups. The list of pies took up a whole page. I had cherry. Mom had chocolate. Laetitia said that she saw us on television the night before and, during the meal, she had us tell her the story over and over again. (145)

'The story': King does not differentiate between the trussed up made-for-tv story of an 'Indian without a country' and the story of the mother and son's successful bid to have their citizenship claims recognised. Both are consumed over pie, and, in as much as they are coveted, both are likened to pie. Inadvertently, so is the story within which they are contained: the metatextual reference to the list of pies that takes up 'a whole page' aligns pies with pages, asking readers to reflect both on our own appetites and on the ease with which we typically consume and digest indigenous cultural products. This is important not just because much of the story’s humour turns on references to food - the mother’s political project is continuously disrupted by the son’s requests for burgers and soft drinks – but because, as Renee Hulan and Linda Warley have noted, the story’s humour is such that students are typically ‘content to appreciate [it]; they ‘gratefully consume’ the story, and ‘resist analyzing it’ (127). Indigeneity à la mode, if you will. And so, when I teach this story, I conclude by talking about pie, so that students might see that the story’s humour – so much of which is about consumption – is not at odds with its politics, but is a very politically engaged strategy to remind the hungry reader that ‘the historical and cultural information needed to be a competent reader, a culturally literate reader of this work, is not represented within Canada’s national mainstream culture’ (Hulan and Warley 140).

The point is not that those of us who are cultural outsiders, who are part of that mainstream, should resist ‘taking’ this story, but rather that we should give very careful thought to the analytical models that we draw upon in attempting to serve it. To begin with, this means that we need to ask how best to serve the particular history that ‘Borders’ reflects, the oral tradition it honours, and the cultural continuum it both celebrates and develops. Only then can we begin to use it to open the limited space that the Canadian government and the Canadian academy have provided for investigating the constraints and contingencies of Canadian citizenship for Indigenous peoples. Only then can we put it in the service of the self-determination and sui generis indigenous citizenship for which it calls.

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