



Racism is an experience acutely felt by many Aboriginal people in Canada. For example, according to a 2005 report of the *First Nations Regional Longitudinal Health Survey* (RHS), 38% of participating First Nations adults experienced at least one instance of racism in the past 12 months; 63% of them felt that it had at least some effect on their self-esteem (First Nations Centre, 2005).

## Expressions of Racism

The labeling of individuals and groups as ‘different’ is part of the process of creating social hierarchies, which represents the foundation of oppression (de Leeuw, Kobayashi, & Cameron, 2011). Throughout most human societies, particular groups have consistently been ‘othered’, marginalized and discriminated against (Ibid.). The renowned theorist Foucault proposed that discrimination is not always expressed in violent ways (e.g., slavery, genocide) but can take less aggressive forms (e.g., colonialism) that present power inequalities as neutral and natural processes (Ibid.). Yet all forms of oppression, including racism, contribute negatively to the well-being of certain racialized groups (Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999). Within the racialized hierarchy of Canadian society, Aboriginal peoples continue to be ‘othered’ by settler<sup>2</sup> groups in an attempt to rationalize colonial actions that disadvantage, oppress, and ultimately harm them (de Leeuw, Kobayashi, & Cameron, 2011). Within Canada, anti-Aboriginal racism is expressed in numerous ways: through stereotyping, stigmatization and violence, as well as through many of the structures of Canadian society.

### Racialized Stereotypes and Stigma

There are a number of negative stereotypes associated with Aboriginal

people, including assumptions about the pervasiveness and cause of alcohol and drug addiction, unemployment, and violence (Backhouse, 1999; de Leeuw, Kobayashi, & Cameron, 2011). One persistent and particularly damaging depiction is that Aboriginal peoples are willing ‘wards of the state,’ dependent on others and ultimately better off when the federal government oversees their affairs (Erickson, 2005). This not only degrades the autonomy of Aboriginal peoples and their legitimate right to be self-determining, but it has damaged the self-concept of countless generations of people who unfortunately, at times, internalize such demeaning stereotypes (Harding, 2006).

The media plays a considerable role in shaping public perceptions of Aboriginal peoples in Canada (Furniss, 2001). Although contemporary representations are more accurate and inclusive of Aboriginal perspectives than at any time in history, they are still often corrupted by misinterpretations, tokenism, and lack of historical or cultural context (Harding, 2006). Media decision-makers select what to report and, in so doing, can enhance or damage public opinion of Aboriginal peoples (Furniss, 2001). News reports often focus on the social and economic challenges facing Aboriginal communities while ignoring stories of discrimination and/or exploitation by powerful groups or authorities (Harding, 2006). In recent years, Aboriginal leaders have attempted to use the media to rally support for issues facing their communities, calling on the ‘politics of embarrassment’ to expose the government’s poor treatment of Aboriginal peoples and accurately inform the public (Furniss, 2001). Sadly, it has proven very difficult to challenge entrenched racial stereotypes and gain support for the equitable treatment of Aboriginal peoples.

Many Canadians’ beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours toward Aboriginal people remain heavily influenced by colonial stereotypes, entrenched in a mentality of ‘us versus them’ (Bourassa, McKay-McNabb, & Hampton, 2004). The positioning of Aboriginal people as an idealized or demonized ‘other’ exaggerates cultural differences and reinforces racialized generalizations (de Leeuw, Kobayashi, & Cameron, 2011). Inaccurate or inadequate education about Canada’s colonial history and its role in creating the disadvantages currently facing Aboriginal communities essentially transfers responsibility for economic and social problems to Aboriginal peoples’ presumed failure to evolve, rather than to the socially and economically damaging effects of colonialism and racism (Harding, 2006).

### Violent Racism

Violent racism is defined as acts of violence perpetrated against a person or group based on the racialized group to which they are assigned (Bowling, 1999). Historically, there are many instances where Aboriginal people suffered violence at the hands of settlers. One poignant example of widespread violence can be found in the experience of Mi’kmaq people in Nova Scotia. During the mid 1700s, the founder of Halifax, Edward Cornwallis, placed a bounty of ten guineas for the scalp of every Mi’kmaq man, woman or child, thus causing the death of thousands (O’Connor, 2011). Although Cornwallis’ government perpetrated heinous acts of racialized violence against the Mi’kmaq people, he is immortalized in the province’s history, having streets, military bases and schools named after him as well as a memorial statue in a downtown Halifax park. For decades, Mi’kmaq people in the province beseeched the city to remove Cornwallis’ name from schools in particular, but

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<sup>2</sup> A settler is defined as “a person who settles in an area” [such as the European settlers of North America] (Oxford Dictionaries, n.d).



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## Idle No More

Widespread backlash against the Idle No More movement demonstrates the unfortunate but undeniable anti-Aboriginal racism that persists within Canada (Perkel, 2013, Van Bommel, 2013). The Idle No More (INM) movement began when four Aboriginal women in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan responded to the Canadian Parliament adopting the Omnibus Bill C-45, which included a number of unfair amendments to Aboriginal land rights (Gordon, 2013). The bill would offer deregulation for industrial development and allow companies to buy and sell reserve land without consideration or compensation to the communities on those lands (Paradis, 2013). This bill disregarded Aboriginal land rights and ignored the environmental and health impacts industrial development would cause (Paradis, 2013). Communities were ignited by the government's lack of concern for Aboriginal treaties and the INM movement gained momentum through social media networks.

The overarching goal of the movement was to advance Indigenous sovereignty, create allies and forge new political relationships, as well as put pressure on the government to protect the environment and Aboriginal rights (Gordon, 2013). Aboriginal leaders, youth and allies rallied together in a united front that did not include a single figurehead but rather a collective, guided by Elders, to support the movement (Anderson, 2013). The INM movement was about more than Bill C-45; it was about giving Indigenous people a voice and solidarity in order to fight other injustices in the future (Caven, 2013). In December 2012, despite great support and publicity of the INM movement, the Omnibus Bill C-45 was passed; thus demonstrating the government's disregard for this national protest (Anderson, 2013).

However, the INM movement also ignited substantial criticism from some members of the non-Aboriginal Canadian public. The founders and supporters of INM wanted to do more than oppose legislation but also to inform the public about the historical and current racism and discrimination faced by Aboriginal people in Canada (Caven, 2013). Unfortunately, those very assumptions and prejudices against Aboriginal peoples became points of contention as INM activists were exposed to an onslaught of racist comments and incidents (Perkel, 2013). At times, the backlash became so heated that Aboriginal leaders made public expressions of concern for the safety of those involved in the movement (Perkel, 2013). Beyond the overt racism from non-Aboriginal sources, one of the founders, Sylvia McAdams, expressed her disappointment that many supporters only offered lip service to INM. She also expressed her desire to see more fervent support for the movement and a better understanding of the history of discrimination faced by Aboriginal peoples (Caven, 2013).

*The continued existence of 'Indian reserves' serves as one of the most visible reminders of the race-based segregation of First Nations people in Canada (Musto, 1990).*



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until recently were met with resistance from the government and the public (Guild, 2011).

There are also numerous examples of the violent racism that Aboriginal peoples experience in contemporary society. As a group, Aboriginal men are two-to-three times more likely than non-Aboriginal men to experience violence by authorities or individuals (Brownridge, 2010). However, it is Aboriginal women who bear the brunt of racialized violence in Canada. In addition to experiencing three-to-four times more interpersonal violence than non-Aboriginal women (Brownridge, 2008), Aboriginal women are at higher risk for harassment by authorities (McGlade, 2010; Razack, 2000). Aboriginal women also face a phenomenon best described as 'racialized misogyny' (the hatred of racialized women), which fosters and legitimizes physical and social violence perpetrated against them by virtue of their exponentially diminished social status (i.e. being a women and being Aboriginal). Examples of this include the high rates of violence reported by Aboriginal women (Brennan, 2011), as well as the notorious 'Highway of Tears' (Lee, 2009), the disappearance of at least 60 women (most of whom

were Aboriginal) from Vancouver's Downtown Eastside between the 1980s and 2002 (Oppal, 2012), and the Robert Pickton murders, which included a disproportionately high number of Aboriginal women (Kubik, Bourassa, and Hampton, 2009; Native Women's Association of Canada, 2007). This intersecting and compounding violence emerged, in part, from the colonial destruction of traditional Aboriginal gender roles, which once afforded women considerable social, economic and political power as well as sexual agency. This base of strength and respect was seriously undermined by a colonial reconstruction of Aboriginal women within racially misogynistic ideologies (Gunn Allen, 1986; Loppie Reading & Barlow, 2009).

#### Structural Racism

Structural racism refers to economic, social and political institutions and processes of a society that create and reinforce racial discrimination (Jackson, McGibbon & Waldron, 2013; Lawrence, Sutton, Kubisch, Susi, & Fulbright-Anderson, 2010). The establishment of 'Indian reserves' and inadequate investment in those reserves serve as examples of structural racism

whereby socio-economic inequities and conditions of disadvantage are created and perpetuated.

The continued existence of 'Indian reserves' serves as one of the most visible reminders of the race-based segregation of First Nations people in Canada (Musto, 1990). Indeed, this overt form of racialized discrimination has been supported by successive governments over several generations. Even in the current context, investment in the social and economic development of reserve communities is paltry compared to other Canadian communities and, in some cases, on-reserve conditions mirror those in developing countries (Ibid.). In fact, most remote First Nation and Inuit communities face innumerable challenges in accessing, extracting or securing financial, natural and human resources respectively, often resulting in absolute as well as relative poverty (Musto, 1990). Diminished federal investment in Aboriginal housing, for example, is troubling, resulting in poor quality housing, poor ventilation and mold, as well as overcrowded housing conditions (Optis, Shaw, Stephenson, & Wild, 2012). Similarly, failure to provide adequate funding for education programs has significantly

influenced educational opportunities for First Nations students (First Nations Education Council, 2009). Moreover, the current federal funding formula for on-reserve water and wastewater systems is often inadequate, leaving many First Nations communities financially incapable of operating and maintaining adequate systems (Simeon, 2010).

### Federal Policies and Aboriginal Peoples in Canada

Structural racism is often rooted in political actions or policies that create and/or reinforce discrimination against a racialized group (Jordan & Weedon, 1995; Sears, Sidanius, & Bobo, 2000). One of the principal means by which this type of racism is expressed against First Nations people in Canada is through the *Indian Act*. Enacted in 1876 by the Canadian government (Moss, 1990), the *Indian Act* was purported to protect the rights of First Nations peoples by recognizing the legal and ethical responsibilities of the Crown. In reality, however, it created an enduring federal structure that could (and does) exert substantial control over First Nations' identity, lands, resources, languages, and cultural practices (Long,

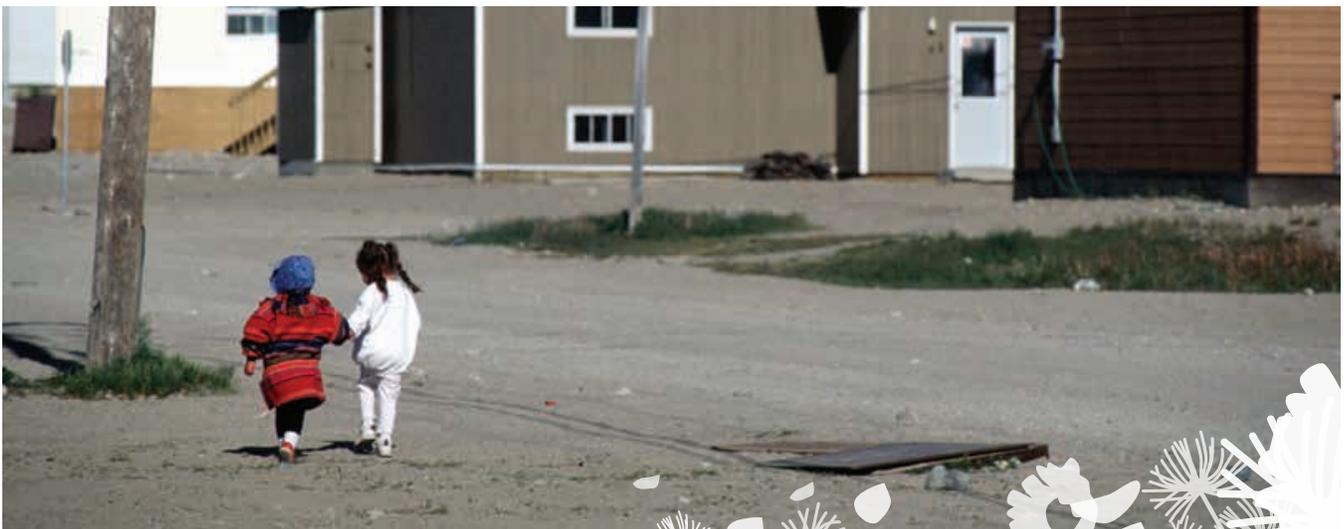
Bear, & Boldt, 1982). In addition to the *Indian Act*, the Department of Indian Affairs (DIA) was created to oversee policies concerning the economic, social, and cultural lives of First Nations peoples (Long, Bear, & Boldt, 1982). Establishment of the DIA and the *Indian Act* ushered in an era of overt racism against First Nations peoples, exemplified by the following quote by the Deputy Superintendent General of Indian Affairs, Duncan Campbell Scott in 1920:

*I want to get rid of the Indian problem... Our objective is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic and there is no Indian question, and no Indian department. (Miller, 2004, p. 35)*

The policies of the *Indian Act* are paternalistic and permit First Nations people little or no control over their lives and communities (Moss, 1990). Although there have been amendments to the

*Act*, the majority represent superficial alterations that do little to address the fundamental inequities it created and maintains (Robson, 1991). This legally sanctioned form of racism infringes on several dimensions of First Nation peoples' political, economic and cultural life, including the power to define who is and is not an 'Indian'<sup>3</sup> and the rights to which they are entitled (Lavoie & Forget, 2011).

Early versions of the *Indian Act* outlined an enfranchisement policy that required individuals to give up their Indian status in order to vote, to join the military, to become a lawyer, clergy, or doctor, or to earn a university degree (Moss, 1990). This policy was implemented in an effort to assimilate First Nations people into Euro-Canadian culture and thus remove the Crown's obligation to provide services and resources outlined in the *Indian Act* (Moss, 1990). Other aspects of the *Indian Act* sought to control the identity of First Nations people, and First Nations women specifically, through policies regarding marital status and family inheritance. Before 1985, section 12(1)(B) of the *Act*



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<sup>3</sup> The term 'Indian' was most commonly used by the Government of Canada up to the 1970s to represent First Nations people (Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, 2012).

stated that First Nations women would lose their legal Indian status if they married a non-Indian man. Section 6 of the *Act* also removed the legal status of women's children, but not of Indian men who married non-Indian women; in fact, non-Indian women who married Indian men would gain status for themselves and their children (Cannon, 2006). This form of assimilation was based on a patriarchal structure of kinship where wealth was passed from fathers to sons and a woman's identity was determined by that of her husband's (Cannon, 2006).

Contemporary revisions of the *Indian Act* have aimed to address some of its most discriminatory policies. For instance, in 1985 the passing of Bill C-31 amended the *Act* so that First Nations women could regain Indian status lost through marriage to a non-First Nations man (Robson, 1991). Another 1985 amendment eliminated enfranchisement, which would strip First Nations people of their status. While these changes are moving in the right direction, the *Indian Act* itself remains a form of structural racism (Long, Bear, & Boldt, 1982). Unfortunately, the *Indian Act* cannot be discarded altogether because there are some policies in it that actually protect the rights of First Nations peoples (de Leeuw, Kobayashi, & Cameron, 2011).

#### **Racism and Institutions: Residential Schools**

Structural racism also occurs within institutions that segregate or discriminate against individuals or groups based on racialization (Williams, 1985; Gee, 2002). One of the most notorious forms of racism at the institutional level was the residential school system, which represented the attempted assimilation of Aboriginal children. Initially, treaties between First Nations leaders and the Canadian government outlined policies that would provide culturally rich, on-reserve education for First Nations children (MacDonald & Hudson, 2012). However, rather than support educational institutions that respectfully

incorporated western and traditional Indigenous knowledge, the government established a system of boarding (residential) schools that aimed to “kill the Indian in the child” (cited in Miller, 2004, p. 35). In 1880, the first residential school was established in Canada, located off-reserve, funded by the federal government, and run predominantly by Catholic and Anglican churches (MacDonald & Hudson, 2012). Until 1950, First Nations (and some Inuit and Métis) children between the ages of five and sixteen were forced to attend these schools – many miles and many months or years away from their families and cultural traditions (Miller, 2004; Milloy, 1996). Parents did not approve of the aggressive assimilation practices undertaken by school administrators, but had no recourse or authority to remove their children from these institutions.

The ideologies and ensuing activities of these schools were fundamentally racist, stripping Aboriginal children of their traditional livelihood skills and training them only for menial jobs, thus restricting their future socio-economic opportunities (Deiter, 1999; Friesen & Friesen, 2002). Students were not permitted to speak their first languages or use their given names (Nagy & Sehdev, 2012), and many experienced neglect; physical, emotional and sexual abuse; poor diets; and exposure to fatal diseases like tuberculosis (MacDonald & Hudson, 2012).

Even when children were permitted to leave residential school, there were no supports for reentering their communities so the transition was not always smooth and family relationships could often not be reestablished. The resulting social isolation, cultural trauma and even internal racism experienced during and after leaving school caused some survivors to turn to negative coping strategies (Nagy & Sehdev, 2012). Ultimately, for many, this form of structural racism resulted in alcohol and substance abuse, violence,

parenting problems, depression and suicide (Ibid.). As well, research suggests that residential schools set in motion a cycle of trauma that has been passed through generations, detrimental to the well-being of Aboriginal people as a whole (Fournier & Crey, 1997; Furniss, 1992; Gagné, 1998; Haig-Brown, 1988; Kirmayer, Simpson, & Cargo, 2003; Milloy, 1999). Sadly, it often falls on children to absorb the feelings of loss and frustration felt by their parents and grandparents. Even though these children did not experience the trauma of residential schools first hand, they are experiencing it indirectly through the effects on their families and communities (Volkan, 1997).

Some researchers have suggested that oppressive government policies such as the establishment of residential schools represent attempted cultural genocide against Aboriginal peoples. Cultural genocide, or ethnocide, aims to extinguish the knowledge, languages, and traditions of a particular group of people (MacDonald & Hudson, 2012). In 1948, the International Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide set the United Nations definition of genocide as killing members of a marginalized group, causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of that group, deliberately inflicting on a group conditions to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part, imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group, and forcibly transferring children of the group to another group (United Nations, 1948). Under this definition, a case of attempted cultural genocide could certainly be made against the residential school system on the basis of its practice of forced assimilation, attempted destruction of traditional cultures, and denial of Indigenous identities (MacDonald & Hudson, 2012). Some critics find the term genocide too controversial; however, it is not being used here to provoke but rather to center racialized colonialism within

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a framework that shows the extent of damage it has had on Indigenous populations (Woolford, 2009). In response to this legacy of trauma, in 2008 Prime Minister Steven Harper issued a statement of reconciliation on behalf of Parliament and all Canadian citizens to express regret for the generations of residential school abuse (CBC News, 2008). The statement has been widely criticized for being crafted to avoid saying that the government took full responsibility and for not adequately addressing the continuing effects on Aboriginal peoples (Dorrell, 2009). The statement of reconciliation also did not challenge the colonial relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal groups (Nagy & Sehdev, 2012).

#### **Justice and Health Care Systems**

Structural racism can also be found within the systems intended to serve our needs, where racist policies intersect with racist stereotypes (Furniss, 2001), often translating into discrimination against Aboriginal people (Dylan, Regehr, & Alaggia, 2008). For example, Aboriginal offenders are more likely to receive sentences of imprisonment if convicted

of a crime (Dylan, Regehr, & Alaggia, 2008). Not surprisingly, Aboriginal peoples are presently the most over-represented group in the Canadian criminal justice system (Martel, & Brassard, 2008; Statistics Canada, 2012) and racism has been exposed as a factor in the way Aboriginal people are treated within systems of justice (Dylan, Regehr, & Alaggia, 2008). As well, racial bias can motivate authorities to question the credibility of Aboriginal people who are victims of crime, often leading to a lack of adequate support (McGlade, 2010). This ultimately contributes to perceptions, on the part of offenders and victims, that the system will not treat them fairly.

Like so many other issues facing Aboriginal people, the legacy of colonialism and anti-Aboriginal racism is implicated in the criminalization of Aboriginal peoples (Proulx, 2000). Over time, authorities such as police, courts and prisons have engaged in racial profiling of Aboriginal peoples (Furniss, 2001). Some scholars purport that this kind of systemic racism and 'over policing' in Aboriginal

communities has led to a strained relationship between Aboriginal peoples and the justice system as a whole (Ibid). Indeed, research reveals that all groups will mistrust authorities if they feel the institution does not represent the interests of their community (Chrismas, 2012).

Research has shown that Indigenous peoples around the world also often have negative experiences with health care settings. Racism can be expressed in these settings through longer wait times, fewer referrals, and disrespectful treatment for Aboriginal people (Narine, 2013; Vukic, Jesty, Mathews, & Etowa, 2012). Actions by service providers that demean, diminish or disempower the cultural identity and well-being of an individual are seen as culturally risky practices (Brown, 2009).

The consequence of racism within health care settings is first and foremost emotional and social harm to Aboriginal peoples. A more long-term and insidious outcome, however, is that Aboriginal people lose trust in a system that claims to care for them. Experiences of harm



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and lack of trust can translate into diminished utilization of services critical to Aboriginal peoples' health, including screening for infectious or chronic disease as well as access to essential medical treatment or pharmaceutical interventions (Loppie Reading, & Barlow, 2009). Ultimately, the trajectory of racism within health care settings leads to diminished health outcomes for Aboriginal people as seen in the current disproportional burden of disease and diminished life expectancy (Loppie Reading & Wien, 2009).

## Conclusion

Much has been written about the connection between political, social and economic disparities and the burden of ill-health facing Aboriginal people in Canada (Backhouse, 1999; Bourassa, McKay-McNabb, & Hampton, 2004; First Nations Centre, 2005; Loppie Reading & Wien, 2009). At the root of these inequities, racial discrimination emerges as a major determinant affecting the overall well-being of Aboriginal individuals and populations (Currie,

Wild, Schopflocher, Laing, & Veugelers, 2012). Historical and contemporary trauma resulting from loss of land, lack of governance, marginalization, incarceration, residential schools, abuse and violence intersect to dramatically affect the mental health of Aboriginal people in Canada (Haskell & Randall, 2009).

Racism experienced on an individual level does harm to one person, which in turn can affect one's family and friends; but racism experienced on a structural level goes beyond the individual. It informs institutions (such as schools, healthcare, and justice) that enact and perpetuate racism against an entire group of people (Zong, 1994). The cumulative impacts of structural racism have been felt throughout generations of Aboriginal people and have caused collective wounds that are not easily mended (Gee, & Ford, 2011). If decades of trauma are to be healed, systems such as justice and health need to address racial prejudice at all levels and move towards embracing the unique cultural traditions, healing and needs of Aboriginal people.

Clearly racism has influenced the political, economic and cultural circumstances of Aboriginal peoples in Canada. Racist ideologies have fostered a social hierarchy in which Aboriginal peoples are denied resources while dominant groups maintain authority and power. Personal and structural racism toward individuals, communities and nations is justified by way of 'othering' Aboriginal peoples through socially constructed differences. In Canada, race-based colonizing powers have attempted to socially isolate, culturally assimilate, and politically decimate Aboriginal peoples as a way of rationalizing colonialism. Legally sanctioned discrimination has hindered opportunities for Aboriginal peoples to be self-determining and generations of residential schools promoted racialized hostility toward Aboriginal peoples and offered a curriculum of assimilation into the body politic of Canada. The harm done to survivors, their children, families, communities, and future generations is immeasurable.

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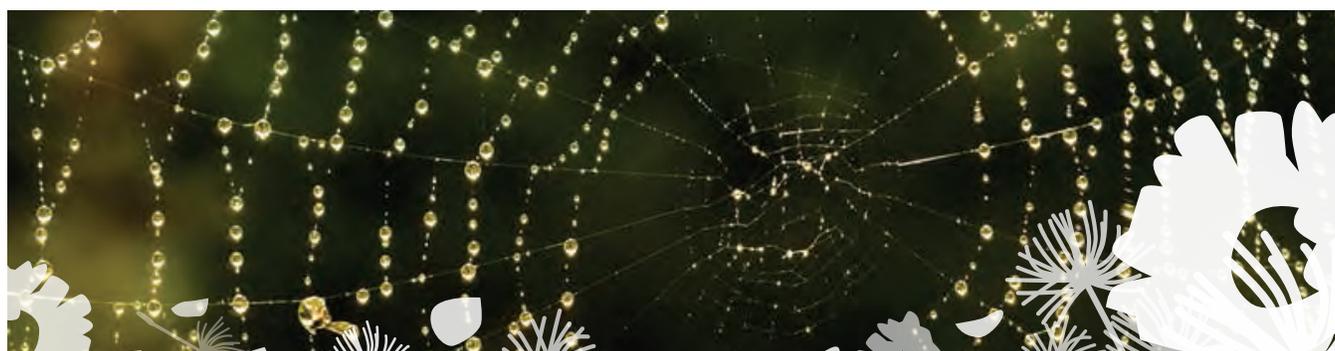
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