The lives of Blackfoot people in the twenty-first century differ markedly from those of their ancestors. At the same time, Blackfoot today continue to be guided by the values and beliefs that sustained their ancestors, values that are embodied not only in ceremony and story but in items of material culture. In this chapter, we set the story of the Blackfoot shirts within the broader context of Blackfoot culture and history.

THE BLACKFOOT WORLD IN A TIME OF CHANGE

The Blackfoot refer to themselves as Niitsitapi, the “real people,” and recognize three nations among themselves: Siksika, Kainai, and Piikani. Today, the Piikani are divided by the Canada-US border into the Apatohsipiikani, who reside in Alberta, and the Ammskaapiipiikani, or Blackfeet, most of whom live in Montana.
Figure 6. Map of Blackfoot territory
Introducing the Blackfoot Nations

Blackfoot traditional territory lies within the Northern Plains, extending from the North Saskatchewan River, in Alberta, south to the Yellowstone River, in Montana, and from the Rocky Mountains as far east as the Great Sandhills, along the provincial border between Alberta and Saskatchewan. The Siksika traditionally occupied the northern and eastern part of this territory, with the Kainai living in the central region and the Piikani closer to the foothills of the Rocky Mountains (Blackfoot Gallery Committee 2001, 6). Blackfoot territory largely consists of grasslands—expansive open areas of land, dominated by short grasses but with occasional thickets of shrubs and bushes—bordered by forests near the mountains. This vast territory is rich in natural resources, including game animals, berries, and medicinal plants, all of which were given to the Blackfoot by Ihtsipaitapiiyo’pa, the Source of All Life. In the past, people lived together in extended clans and travelled in small groups throughout this land, assisted by teams of dogs and, after European contact, by horses. They were able to live well by moving camp frequently to avoid overhunting or overharvesting in any one area and every summer would meet together for the aako’ka’tssin, or circle camp, where ceremonies, visits with relatives, and making plans and alliances took place.

Although the Blackfoot interacted with animals, birds, plants, insects, reptiles, and other beings in their territory, the buffalo—iinnii—were especially important to their survival. The buffalo provided meat, its hides were used for tipi covers and robes, its bones could be fashioned into tools, and its intestines could be made into containers. Other creatures had their own gifts to give: pronghorn antelope and elk provided hides as well as meat; porcupines were valued for their quills; muskrat and beaver were admired for their ability to live comfortably in the water and on land; birds had the gift of flight, enabling them to see the land from the sky and thus alert warriors to possible danger. Although life was often hard on the Northern Plains, especially given the extremes of climate, Blackfoot people and other beings lived together successfully in this environment for countless generations.

By the end of the eighteenth century, this way of life had already begun to change, as the fur trade brought Europeans and Americans into Blackfoot territory. As the nineteenth century progressed, settlers arrived in ever greater
Figure 7. Writing-on-Stone area, with Sweetpine Hills in background. Photograph by Narcisse Blood.

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Figure 8. Napi’s playground. Photograph by Narcisse Blood.
numbers, staking claims to lands in the area. While these newcomers brought with them many things that Blackfoot found useful, they also brought alcohol and diseases, such as smallpox and tuberculosis, and they overhunted animals in the region to the point of extinction. The Blackfoot population was decimated, and the survivors suffered extreme hardship as the buffalo herds on which their lives depended were destroyed by encroaching settlers. The late Narcisse Blood, a ceremonial leader and educator from the Kainai Nation, explained that the killing of the buffalo was a deliberate act of aggression against the Blackfoot people, one that continues to have ramifications for the land as well as for the people:

It was occurring right at that time when our numbers went down. The killing off of the food source—the destruction of the buffalo—was also a little bit easier. It was very violent at that time. There were consequences of killing off the buffalo and ignoring the knowledge that was here. Because the Blackfoot predate Christianity, predate Stonehenge. We were there. We predate the Great Pyramids. What was it that enabled us to live here? It was sustainability. This land can sustain all of us. But we take so much. We keep taking, even today.

The combined effects of disease, starvation, and population loss limited the Blackfoot people’s ability to protect their territory. As it became apparent that the settlers were not going to leave, Blackfoot political leaders accepted the necessity of negotiating terms for future survival. In 1855, the Blackfeet in Montana signed the Lame Bull Treaty with the United States government, and, in 1877, the Siksika, Piikani, and Kainai entered into Treaty 7 with representatives of the British Crown. Following these treaties, land was set aside for each of the Blackfoot nations, reserves that today form the heart of their communities. In Alberta, the Siksika Nation is located east of Calgary, and the Kainai Nation lies to the west of Lethbridge. The Apatohsipiikani, or northern Piikani, have a reserve situated between the towns of Pincher Creek and Fort MacLeod, and the Ammskaapipiikani, or southern Piikani, who are known also as the Blackfeet, have a reservation just across the border in northern Montana. The loss of traditional lands, sacred landscapes, and access to resources, as well as the loss of

One of the things that is overlooked, especially with our people and others that we deal with, is the devastation of smallpox. We weren’t conquered. How do you fight a disease that you don’t have any immunity to? The populations were much higher, thus the balance of power being in our favour during that time. But it was changing pretty fast. When our numbers dwindled, the way they did, and for people to understand the devastation of these diseases, you have to go back to Europe and look at the bubonic plague, and how devastating it was for Europe. Well, that same thing occurred here.

TATSIKISTAMIK / NARCISSE BLOOD
political and cultural autonomy, is all part of the background story of the shirts, which left Blackfoot territory just before this difficult period.

**KNOWLEDGE AND SURVIVAL**

*And so it was just at that time that the power started tilting, and it wasn’t too long after that they wanted to subjugate us and the whole colonial experience kicked in. To change us. And that is when you start seeing more and more missionaries coming in to convert us. And when that wasn’t working, the next process was residential school; to start taking children away. When we had our numbers up, they wouldn’t dare take the children away.*

TATSIKISTAMIK / NARCISSE BLOOD

*It was in the olden days that these were called aawahkaotsisokasim, war shirts. They were worn into battle. And when our young people searched for honour and glory, through bravery, that’s how they managed to secure their shirts. The recognition comes from that. Today, we have different methods; we have different challenges, which would also justify that we continue to honour our young people, our young men, with this kind of recognition when they have accomplished something remarkable in life.*

AATSO’TO’AAWA (SHOT ON BOTH SIDES) / ANDY BLACKWATER

*And so there’s stuff that our kids need to know. And the shirts are part of it, because they have a story. And life wasn’t always like that. It wasn’t this bad. So kids have to understand that. So when we talk about fitting in culture, language, knowledge, all those things, it takes away from the violence and abuse. You want to be a better person. You want to pursue that knowledge. So to me it’s a bonus having those shirts, because they’re visible, and they can be recreated, for whatever reason. So to me when we talk about the violence and abuse of our people, kids need to know that it was very intentional and very systematic. But it’s not that way anymore. It’s up to us to do something about it, it’s up to us to learn the stories. And it’s up to us to teach them, as adults.*

PAM HEAVY HEAD
This period also saw the passage of the Indian Act, first passed in 1876 and subsequently amended many times. As was also the case in the United States, federal policy in Canada aimed at assimilation of Aboriginal populations into the dominant society. Given this goal, Blackfoot ways of life were a target for destruction. Ceremonies crucial to sustaining their communities were outlawed, and many items of material culture were collected by outsiders and eventually found their way into museums. Once the Blackfoot were confined to reserves and subject to restrictions on movement under the Indian Act, visits to sacred sites connected to Blackfoot origin stories became difficult, if not impossible. Children were forcibly removed from their families and sent to residential schools, a policy deliberately intended to weaken traditional languages and cultural knowledge. Although some individuals and families were better able to resist these attacks on their culture and beliefs than others, the long-term effects of these policies was to create significant gaps in the knowledge that many Blackfoot people have about their history or culture.

Today, all four Blackfoot nations are engaged in efforts to close these gaps in cultural knowledge, and it has become very clear that forced assimilation programs did not succeed in eradicating Blackfoot culture. Many people still speak or at least understand the Blackfoot language and are working to improve their own fluency and to teach the language to younger generations. Although by no means everyone is involved in ceremony, since the 1970s there has been a revival of the ceremonies that connect people to the world around them and which sustain traditional culture. Many teachers are themselves community members and are trying to incorporate Blackfoot language and culture into the classroom. Cultural values and protocol are also incorporated into many aspects of governance, health care, and community services. The devastating decline in population during the nineteenth century has been reversed, and there are now some 42,000 registered tribal members. While recovery from the impact of colonization will take time and there are significant challenges ahead, the Blackfoot are well on their way to regaining their pride in their cultural heritage, a strong sense of self-identity, and the right to self-determination.