



Tomson Highway

Photo by Sean Howard

## THE (POST) MISTRESS

Text, music, and lyrics by Tomson Highway  
French translation: Tomson Highway and Raymond Lalonde

### STUDY GUIDE

A 2016 co-production by Théâtre français de Toronto and Pleiades Theatre



## SYNOPSIS

The central character in *The (Post) Mistress* is Marie-Louise Painchaud, a middle-aged, half Cree, half French Canadian post mistress in Lovely, a fictitious village in Northern Ontario. Lovely is located somewhere along the French River, not far from the mining town of Complexity. We quickly discover that Marie-Louise has an uncanny ability to read the town's mail *through* the envelopes. The letters, which arrive from the four corners of the world, tell of her neighbours' foibles, fantasies and fibs, both large and small. They inspire Marie-Louise and she turns their stories into an eclectic array of songs inspired by musical traditions, also from around the world. We also discover the origins of her extraordinary powers as she passes the time waiting for her beloved husband, Roland Painchaud, to join her. The French title, which translates as "Zesty Gopher got squashed by a fridge," is a line from the play and gives an idea of some of the loopy characters who populate Marie-Louise's imagination and Tomson Highway's world.

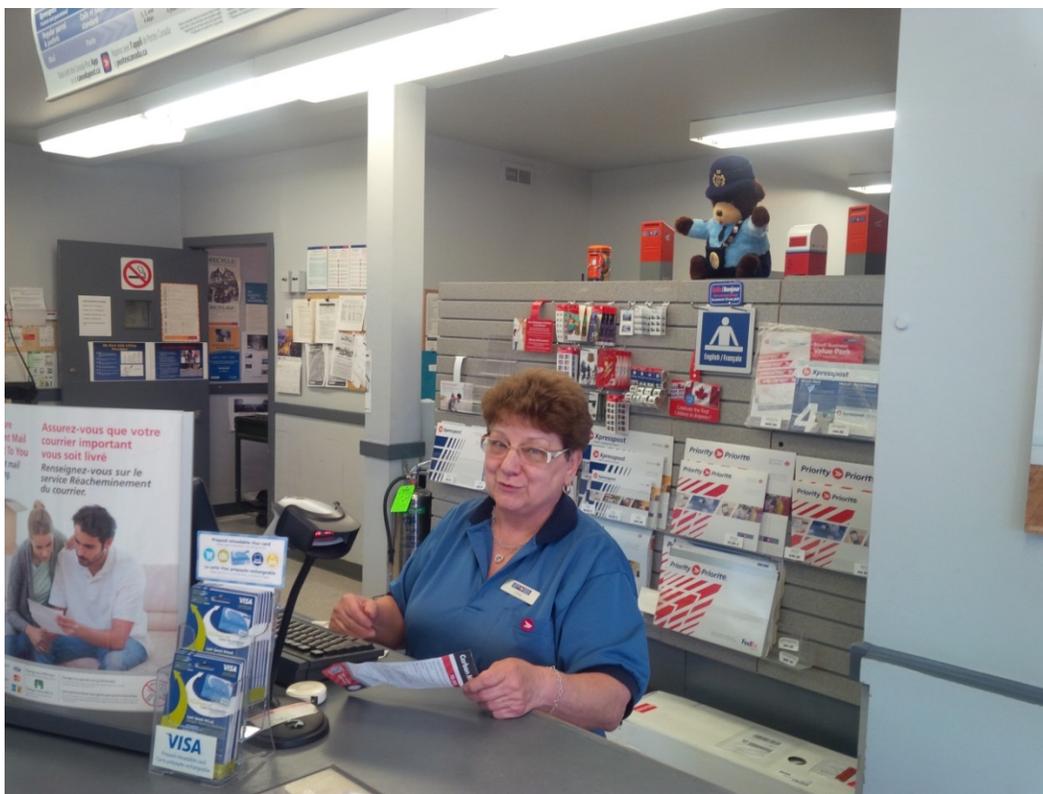
In *The (Post) Mistress*, Tomson Highway used the real village of Noëlville and the mining city of Sudbury, Ontario as his inspiration for Lovely and Complexity.



The Noëlville post office

### A Word from Tomson Highway

Aside from the country post offices, and their post mistresses whom I have come to know and love over the years, the story that inspired me to write this play is that of a goddess: Persephone, Queen of the Dead. Imagine Persephone as a simple human, a woman working in a little post office in northern Ontario. To one extent or another, my work has always been inspired by the three world mythologies that I see as having shaped the major part of modern-day North American thought and behaviour: Christian; its predecessor, Greek; and its successor, Aboriginal, in my case, Cree. For example, an earlier play of mine, *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, featured the gods, Zeus and Hera, as a married human couple living on an ordinary Indian reserve in northern Ontario. *The (Post) Mistress*, on the other hand, addresses the issue of death -- is there death? Or is there not? It depends on the culture, on the very structure of the language that expresses the idea. For instance, in Aboriginal cosmology there is no death. That is to say, the dead don't go away to another spot on the STRAIGHT LINE of hell, earth, and heaven. Rather, they get "translated," as a beam of energy, as electric, biological material, to another place on the CIRCLE of life. They haven't gone away; they're still here, which is why the world we inhabit is so magical, and why we live inside a miracle. And this is why much of my work has always addressed the eternal battle between linear Christian cosmology and the circle of Aboriginal thought, between the phallic and the yonic, between God and His Wife – the wife he seems to have lost – somewhere on his travels through Europe, between the western divisions of male and female, and the genderless structure of the Aboriginal world view. In fact, THAT's what most of us Native writers write about, with an obsession that borders on madness.



The post mistress of Noëlville

### **A Word from the Director, John Van Burek**

At Pleiades, over the years, we have brought you works from around the world, including plays from various parts of French-speaking Canada. But till now, we have never had the opportunity to bring you something from our very own Indigenous culture, right here in Canada. It's exciting to be able to do so now, especially because it's with a new work from none other than Tomson Highway, our country's pioneer Native playwright, and someone I've known since the mid-eighties when he ran Native Earth Performing Arts. And for me, the cherry on the sundae is that we can bring you his play as either *The (Post) Mistress* or its French-language equivalent, *Zesty Gopher s'est fait écraser par un frigo*. As with so many things Canadian, you can pick your official language yet still enjoy the same wonderful stuff. Here, Tomson the composer, lyricist and playwright has taken his eclectic mélange of songs and fashioned them into a whole range of great stories, all told by Marie-Louise Painchaud, the endearing Métis post mistress who reigns over her little *bureau de poste*, which is the very heartbeat of her postage stamp village in northern Ontario. In Tomson's inimitable way, the whole shebang is completely loopy but, as you will discover, it's magical, moving, filled with love and intimacy. A beautiful example of Native storytelling combined with a worldly and world-wide experience that is uniquely Tomson Highway. And, it's yet another reminder of how rich our mix of Canadian cultures is. Have fun.

### **A Word from Joël Beddows, Artistic Director, Théâtre français de Toronto**

Some artists deserve to be referred to as "a monument" or, as the Japanese say, "a national living treasure." The Cree playwright, novelist and composer, Tomson Highway, is clearly part of our living Canadian heritage and we have to say so, loud and clear. Not because he is frozen in time or that his work claims to portray days gone by. Quite the contrary! He offers contemporary images of a living culture, that of Indigenous peoples. It is a complex kaleidoscope and above all, as in the case of *The (Post) Mistress*, filled with humour.

Marie-Louise Painchaud, Highway's lively Métis woman, is bold as brass, says aloud what most people only dare think. She conjures up hidden truths that need to be brought to light; she reminds us that the dead are still among us, that a song often conveys emotion better than prose, that a well-made tale has more value than a banal, verifiable fact. Always charming, she is also truculent, pragmatic and even, at times, grating. But first and foremost, she is "authentic." I rarely use this word which, today, is all too often void of meaning. And yet, here it seems to aptly describe a character that mirrors all those who believe in the beauty of spontaneous speech. Through all this, she tells us that the only truth which counts lies in our memories, the kind we make into tales and the love we feel for other. She may be a work of fiction but I prefer to see her also as a "national living treasure," if only during her performance. And, she reminds us there are myths in the making all around us. All we have to do is turn them into stories that our children will in turn want to tell.

### About Pleiades Theatre

Pleiades was founded in 1997 with the mandate to celebrate various cultures of the world through the presentation of outstanding works of theatre that originate in languages other than English. Whether written by Canadian or international playwrights, new or classical, the works are selected for their entertainment value, rich cultural content, and relevancy to diverse Toronto audiences. We strive to present works not widely known in Toronto, and to present – where possible – translated works in both official languages (English and French). To date, we have presented theatrical works in translation from Acadia, France, Germany, Greece, India Israel, Italy, Ontario, Québec, Russia, and Ukraine. As theatre is the most human of art forms, we believe it to be the best way to inspire Canadians to see the world together.

### About Théâtre français de Toronto

Established in 1967, Théâtre français de Toronto (TfT) has positioned itself as one of the most influential francophone theatre companies outside Quebec with more than 260 shows produced to date. The company enjoys an impeccable reputation among its peers, the artist community and its public having been honoured on numerous occasions with awards and nominations for the outstanding quality of its work. Over the years, TfT' sphere of influence has grown outside Ontario and productions now frequently tour all over the nation.

TfT welcomes 10,000 spectators annually to its main stage from all over the Greater Toronto Area and southwestern Ontario. Its season consists of a full slate of productions for general audiences as well as shows for adolescents and children. Shows have been performed at the Berkeley Street Theatre since 1990—and since 2005 are offered with *surtitled* performances; a popular option among non-French speakers desiring to have access to French-language theatre. Its varied repertoire includes Canadian and international works, new original productions and the great classics.



The town of Noëlville

### Tomson Highway



Tomson Highway was born in a snow bank on the Manitoba/Nunavut border to a family of nomadic caribou hunters. He had the great privilege of growing up in two languages, neither of which was French or English; they were Cree, his mother tongue, and Dene, the language of the neighbouring "nation," a people with whom they roamed and hunted. From there he went on to be trained as a classical pianist and composer, studying with some of the finest teachers in Canada, most notably William Aide and Anton Kuerti.

Today, he enjoys an international career as playwright, novelist, and pianist/songwriter. His best known works are the plays, *The Rez Sisters*, *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, *Rose*, *Ernestine Shuswap Gets Her Trout* and the best-selling novel, *Kiss of the Fur Queen*. From 1986-92, he ran Canada's premiere Native theatre company, Native Earth Performing Arts (based in Toronto), out of which emerged an entire generation of professional Native playwrights, actors and, more indirectly, the many other Native theatre companies that now dot the country. Today, Tomson divides his year equally between a cottage in northern Ontario (near Sudbury, from whence comes his partner of 29 years) and Gatineau Québec, at both of which locales he is working on his second novel. Tomson wrote the music, lyrics, and book for *The (Post) Mistress*. It was first produced in 2011 and has had several productions in various Canadian theatres, including the French version, *Zesty Gopher s'est fait écraser par un frigo*. Pleiades' coproduction with the Tft is the first in Toronto.

### Patricia Cano



Patricia Cano is a Peruvian-Canadian artist - actor, singer/songwriter from Sudbury who studied drama at the University of Toronto. In 2001 she began her on-going collaboration with Tomson Highway, with whom she travels the globe performing Cree cabaret. Beginning in 2003 Patricia spent four years in Paris at Ariane Mnouchkine's celebrated Théâtre du Soleil, followed by seven months in Rio de Janeiro where she immersed herself in that city's music scene. In 2009, Patricia launched her debut album, *This is the New World*, a

collaboration with Brazilian musician Carlos Bernardo, comprised of original songs in French, English, Spanish and Portuguese. Since then she has been featured on concert and music festival stages across Canada. In 2010/2011, Patricia was a member of the National Arts Centre's English Theatre Company, and in 2015 she made her Pleiades debut in the role of the nurse, Angelina, in the production of *The Sound of Cracking Bones/Le bruit des os qui craquent*. In 2015/2016 Patricia performed *The (Post) Mistress* in Saskatoon and Vancouver, after which she toured B.C., Ontario, and Québec with her band. Patricia is currently recording her sophomore album, to be released in February 2017. On April 19th, 2017 Patricia will perform at Koerner Hall with her band, and again on May 12th alongside Tomson Highway.

### Marcus Ali



Marcus Ali is a Toronto-based saxophonist and a graduate of York University's jazz program. A versatile musician who is equally at home in a wide range of genres, he can be heard playing on over sixty albums on a variety of woodwinds (saxophones, flutes, clarinets, West African flutes, and tin whistles). He has performed, toured, and recorded with dozens of bands including Grand Prix de Jazz award winner Nick Ali and Cruzao, Matt Dusk, Mr. Something Something, Orquesta Fantasia, Tomson Highway, and The Composers Collective Big Band. Currently Marcus can be heard with the Ali Bros, Grüvoria, DRUMHAND, Soldiers of Song: A Tribute to The Dumbells, and the multi-Juno nominated Jason Wilson. He has toured extensively across Canada as well as throughout the U.S.A, the U.K., the Caribbean, and Japan.

### John Van Burek



John Van Burek has directed over one hundred plays and translated more than fifty. In 1971 he launched the Théâtre français de Toronto and, with Bill Glassco, founder of the Tarragon Theatre, he began translating the works of Michel Tremblay. In 1997, he founded Pleiades in order to bring great works from the world's repertoires to Toronto audiences. Since the early 70's he has also taught theatre in both English and French across Canada, in the U.S., and in Europe. Mr. Van Burek has received many awards, including two Chalmers Awards, the Toronto Drama Bench Award for Distinguished Contribution to Canadian Theatre, several Dora Nominations, and the Queen's Golden Jubilee Medal. He was decorated by l'Ordre de la Pléiade (France) and he received the prestigious Silver Ticket Award from the Toronto Alliance for the Performing Arts. He is an Associate Board member of the Michaëlle Jean Foundation.

### Joël Beddows



Director and dramaturge Joël Beddows has pursued creative projects that lie at the crux of social critique, poetry, and symbolism. Whether in the field of creation, classical theatre or theatre for young audiences, Beddows considers every project an opportunity for questioning our contemporary world and its rapport with imagination, history, and collective memory. Beddows' recent work testifies to this endeavor: *Happy Days* by Samuel Beckett (2010), *Frères d'hiver* by Michel Ouellette (2011), *East of Berlin* by Hannah Moscovitch (2012), *Visage de feu* by Marius von Mayenburg (2013), *Petites bûches* by Jean-Philippe Lehoux (2014), and *Un neurinome sur une balançoire* by Alain Doom (2015). He is the former Artistic Director of Ottawa's Théâtre la Catapulte (1998-2010) and was Head of the Theatre Department at the University of Ottawa (2011-2016) before joining Théâtre français de Toronto as Artistic Director in July 2016.

## FOR TEACHERS: BEFORE THE PERFORMANCE

### HOW TO PREPARE STUDENTS FOR A THEATRE VISIT

Seeing a live theatrical performance should be an enjoyable experience for all. To maximize the artistic and educational benefit to your students in seeing *The (Post) Mistress*, it is important to review the following rules and etiquette BEFORE leaving the school.

### THEATRE HOUSE RULES

- Food and drink (other than bottled water) are not allowed in the theatre.
- Electronic recording devices are not permitted in the theatre, including cameras, tape recorders, video recorders, etc.
- Cellphones are NOT to be used during performance and MUST be turned off or switched to silent mode; this includes NO TEXTING, as light from the phone screen and notification noises are extremely distracting to performers and fellow audience members.

### AUDIENCE ETIQUETTE

#### **Arrive on time and be seated before the performance starts**

- Late arrivals will be asked to wait in Theatre lobby until there is a suitable break in the performance.

#### **Refrain from talking during the performance**

- It is not okay to talk during the performance; it is disrespectful to the performers and distracting to those sitting around you. It is appropriate to laugh, cry and gasp when the moment calls for it, but other sounds should be saved for after the show.

#### **Students and teachers should remain seated during the performance**

- Washroom trips should be discussed as a group and planned prior to the performance. Tell students the length of the performance so they can use the washroom before or after the show. *The (Post) Mistress* runs for approximately 2 hours with intermission.

#### **No one should be allowed to leave the theatre during the performance unless absolutely necessary**

- When, and if it is necessary, leaving the performance space should be done as quietly and politely as possible. Exit doors which are often noisy should be opened and shut carefully so as not to disturb others.

#### **Students need to be supervised during the performance**

- Teachers should position themselves amongst students so that they can respond quickly to disturbances that might arise. In the rare cases where a student persists in being disruptive, we ask that a teacher remove that student as quietly as possible.

## CONNECTIONS TO THE CURRICULUM Grades 8-12

### Specific Links

- Humanities and Social Sciences
- History and Geography
- Community involvement
- Equity, diversity, social justice
- Languages

### Themes

- Daily life in a small community
- Social issues in a small community
- Violence against women
- Family
- Love relationships
- Relationships between Aboriginal peoples and the natural world



## LESSON PLANS AND ACTIVITIES

### ACTIVITY # 1

#### **BEFORE THE SHOW**

##### **Creating context**

- Ask students to define/explain **tango, rumba, waltz**
- Ask students to situate these dances in their country of origin
- Ask students to describe the various rhythms of these dances

##### **Exploration**

- Divide the class into small groups
- Each group will take on one type of dance
- Each group will find the music and the rhythm for their dance

#### **AFTER THE SHOW**

- Have students comment on the various dances and songs in the show

## LESSON PLANS AND ACTIVITIES

### ACTIVITY #2

#### **BEFORE THE SHOW**

##### **Creating context**

- Ask the students to share their definition of a monologue.
- Who do we talk to in a monologue? What do we talk about? Why do we talk?

##### **Exploration**

- Lead a group reading of the monologue below.
- Ask the students: who is talking? What is she talking about? (Themes of family and relationships)
- Ask the students to share what they notice about the language used. (What is the difference between the written words in a play? in a novel?)

##### **Monologue excerpt from the play**

«Oh, reminds me so much of the time when my husband – that is, my first husband, Winston Turner – died. Winner, we called him. Blue-eyed ray of sunshine. Only twenty-eight. Tourist-lodge manager. Boating accident, drowned on Lake Misty Maskimoot while out trout fishing, a storm. Leaving me a widow at age twenty-four, and single mother to a toddler baby. Marie-Louise Painchaud – at one time Mary-Lou Turner – of Lovely, Ontario. Postmistress, in a sense, to the dead Winston Turner, late manager of the Carlton Bay Lodge. So then I waited two years after his funeral, which I thought was a respectable period of time, before I looked at other men. Which is when I met Rolly. Roland Painchaud, carpenter and contractor, builder of houses, builder of that, all-round handyman. Big strapping guy recently arrived in Starlight Falls from Sainte-Rose-du-Lac, Manitoba. Bumped into him at the Safeway store in Starlight Falls, literally, with my shopping cart, him rushing around the corner with an armful of canned goods and crackers and cereal boxes. Comes rushing around the corner and, boom, crashes right into my shopping cart, drops all his groceries. So I bend down to help him pick them up and he says, «no need.» But I help anyway and before we know it, we're reaching for the same can of beans and we're touching, hands, fingers... and that was it, boom, the spark was lit.

## LESSON PLANS AND ACTIVITIES

## ACTIVITY # 3

**AFTER THE SHOW****Creating context**

- Ask students to read this song in Cree
- Ask students to list animals mentioned and to situate them geographically
- Ask students to list names of trees and to situate them
- Ask students whether this text is a prayer and why

**Exploration**

- Ask students how this text shows the relationship between the Cree people and nature
- Ask students to find what these animals represent for First Nation peoples : crow, wolf, bear, fox – among others

Kinnaaskoomit'naan kaagithow keethawow (We thank you)

Ooma oota waaskeetuskameek ithigook kwayus (all of you on this earth)

Kaagitaap'miyaak oomsisi, (who watch over us)

Meeg'waach oota eepimaat'siyaak. (while we live here)

Kaagithow keethawow seetuk, (all of you trees)

Waskwayuk, ooskaatigwuk, seetagwunaatigwuk, (birches, pines, spruce)

Kaagithow keethawow pisisk'wuk (all of you four-legged creatures)

Mahiganuk, maageeseesuk, muskwuk, (wolves, foxes, bears)

Ateeg'wuk, amisk'wuk, atim'wuk, (caribou, beavers, dogs)

Kaagithow keethawow pitheeseesuk, (all of you creatures of the air)

Chaachaagathoowuk, peepeeks'eesuk, (blackbirds, robins)

Keeyaask'wuk, seeseepuk, mawg'wuk, migisoowuk, (seagulls, ducks, loons, eagles)

Kaagithow keethawow neepeegaana, meensa, kinooseewuk (all of you flowers, berries, fish )

Assiniyuk, thootin, nipi, saagaa-iguna, aski. (rocks, wind, water, lakes, the Earth)

Kinanaaskoomitinaan aski (we thank you, Earth)

Ithigook kwayus kaagana-ithimiyaak oomsisi (for watching over us)

Meeg'waach oota waaskeetuskameek eepimaat'siyaak (while we live here)

Ooma neet'naan ayut'sitinoowuk. (those of us known as humans)

Kinaanaskoomitinaan, kisaageet'naan, (we thank you, we love you)

Kinaanaaskoomitin, kisaageetin... (I thank you, I love you)

### Little Cree glossary

Astum – come here

Ateek – caribou

Athweepi – to rest, to relax

Awus – go away

Eehee - yes

Maggeesees – fox

Mawch – no

Meegwetch – thank you

Migisoo – eagle

Mush – term used with sled dogs : let's go

Muskoosis(uk) – little bear(s)

Taannsi – hello, good day

Tapwee – really

### A few notes on the Cree language

Genders do not exist : everybody is he/she, masculine/feminine

The « g » as in Georges does not exist, all the « g » are pronounced as in Gaga  
(notes from *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, Tomson Highway's best-selling novel)

### A few reflections by Tomson Highway (excerpts from the Henry Kreiser Lecture Series)

European languages are obsessed by the question of gender. They divide the universe into that which is male and that which is female. Aboriginal languages, on the other hand, divide their universe not into genders but into that which is animate and that which is inanimate.

Speaking one language... is like living in a house with one window.



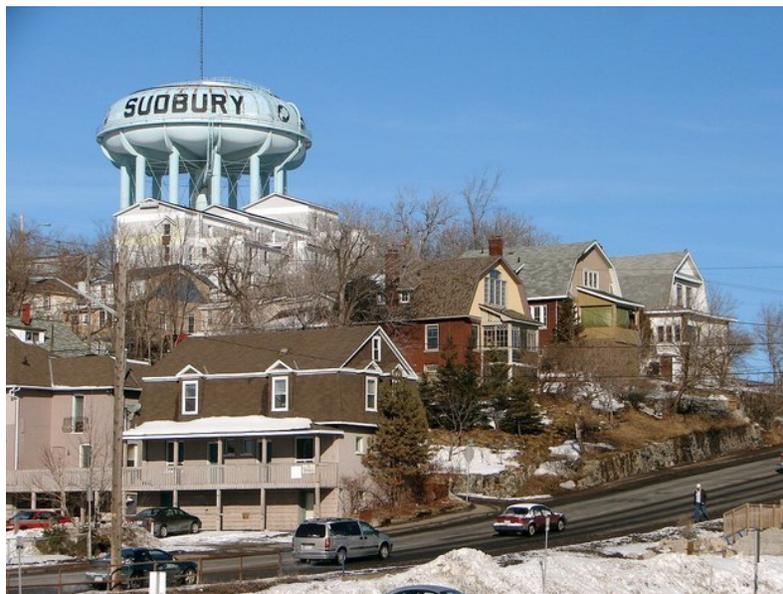
## Some Notes on the History of the Sudbury Region

### The Aboriginal presence in the region of Greater Sudbury

The term Aboriginal refers to three groups: First Nations, Inuit, and Métis.

Human habitation of the Sudbury area began approximately 9,000 years ago following the retreat of the last continental ice sheet. By the time of European arrival, the region north of Lake Huron and surrounding Lake Superior had been dominated by the Ojibwa people for hundreds of years. A major Algonquian-speaking nation, the Ojibwa were fishers and hunter-gatherers who typically lived in temporary encampments.

- In 2006, 9,970 members of the population of Sudbury were Aboriginal, representing 6.4% of the city's total population.
- 5,430 people identified as Métis, representing more than half (54%) of the city's Aboriginal population. Otherwise, 4,260 were First Nations and 35 identified as Inuit.
- In the Sudbury area the most widely spoken Aboriginal language is Ojibwa.



A view of Sudbury

### The First Nations of Ontario

More than 220,000 people in Ontario identify as First Nations. There are 133 collective First Nations within Ontario, and each nation is unique in its beliefs, language, and history. A quarter of these communities are small and remote, and they continue to have strong bonds to their territory. For Aboriginal people, whose culture is deeply rooted in nature, there is no barrier between the spiritual and physical world.

### **Inuit People of Ontario**

Today more than 50,000 Inuit people continue to maintain their unique culture within their distinct homeland of Nunavut. Despite the influences of modernity and commodification, the Inuit have maintained their language, basic values, and beliefs, which connect them to the northern landscape. However, some Inuit people migrate to southern Canada where they seek further education or work. More than 3000 Inuit people live in major urban areas of Ontario, where they make notable contributions to the landscape of arts and culture.

### **Métis People of Ontario**

The Métis are a distinct Aboriginal people with a history, culture, language, and unique territory which includes the waterways of Ontario that encircle the Great Lakes and stretch to what is now known as the historical North West. The Metis Nation is the result of unions between First Nations men and women and Europeans.



### **Francophone Presence in Ontario**

Francophone presence in Ontario has its origins in one of several great movements of history: the *coureurs de bois*, French colonists that arrived in Quebec during the 17<sup>th</sup> century, criss-crossed the northern regions of the province to trade furs with First Nations communities.

The furs were transported by canoe from the Nipissing region to Montreal and Quebec City and then shipped to Europe. The fur trade was a lucrative source of commerce. Beaver pelts were particularly coveted for the manufacture of hats.

During the 17<sup>th</sup> century, few women of European descent were available for marriage, so many of the *coureurs de bois* married Aborigines. These marriages made it easier for settlers to adapt to their new environment, which explains the prevalence of Métis people in northern Ontario and Québec today.

### **The Region of Sudbury**

During the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup>, there was a major migration of French Canadians out of Quebec. Most notably, hundreds of thousands were enticed by factory jobs in the northeastern United States. Fearful that these migrants would lose their Catholic faith and French culture, the Church strongly encouraged Québécois families to join new colonies that had recently been established in northern Ontario during the construction of the railroad. There, they would benefit from the rich potential of farming, mining and forestry along the route of the Canadian Pacific. A great number of French Canadians settled on the land and in rural communities around Sudbury.



During the construction of the railroads, huge copper deposits were discovered. Mixed with the copper, nickel was also found. Although nickel had no value at first, it later became a major source of mining in the region. A large portion of the miners were French Canadian, while many Italian, Polish, and Ukrainian workers later settled in the area.



The Big Nickel of Sudbury



Sudbury at the beginning of the last century

Today, many of Sudbury's immigrants come from South America, Africa, and Asia. The city of Greater Sudbury has one of the largest surface areas of any Ontario municipality.

An interesting fact: 1.85 million years ago, a meteorite landed in Sudbury. This created what is known as the Sudbury Basin. Enormous black rocks formed at the basin's surface, giving it a lunar appearance. In fact, NASA held training sessions outside Sudbury in preparation for its missions to the moon. The region is now more wooded and contains approximately 330 lakes. It has become a highly popular destination for nature-lovers and campers.



An aerial view of the French River

Sudbury is also an important centre for Francophone culture, with the Théâtre du Nouvel-Ontario, Les Éditions Prise de parole, CANO, and La Slogue du Carrefour francophone, an important presenter of events. Sudbury is also the site of many reputable teaching and research institutions, such as Laurentian University, Collège Boréal, and the University of Sudbury. It was at the University of Sudbury that the first Franco-Ontarian flag was raised on September 25<sup>th</sup>, 1975.

<https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Portail:Franco-Ontariens>

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[https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grand\\_Sudbury](https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grand_Sudbury)