

Nlaka'pamux Blanket Exercise





Langley Meadows students participating in the blanket exercise.



“My experiences with so many blanket exercises have shown me how the reactions can be so different...so many things come into play and we always need to watch for those who may be triggered by the presentations.”

Nlaka’pamux Blanket Exercise for Gladys Module

BCTF worked with partners of KAIROS to adapt the national version of the Blanket Exercise for BC, and the Nlaka’pamux territory.

KAIROS unites eleven national Canadian churches and religious organizations in faithful work for human rights and ecological justice through research, education, partnership, and advocacy. In 1996, the *Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* concluded that public education is key to realizing a renewed relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples—one based on sharing, respect and the mutual recognition of rights and responsibilities.

The KAIROS Blanket Exercise is an experiential teaching tool that uses participatory popular education to raise awareness of the nation-to-nation relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada. It teaches a history of Canada that most people never learn. It is a way to open, or continue, the conversation about decolonization.

The exercise is designed to deepen understanding of the denial of Indigenous peoples’ nationhood throughout Canadian history. It explores the major themes and recommendations of the *Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*, examines how federal policies and programs impact the lives of Indigenous peoples in Canada, and identifies what Indigenous peoples and their allies are doing to bring about positive change.

How it works

The exercise begins with blankets arranged on the floor to represent Canada before the arrival of Europeans. Students actively participate by taking on the role of Indigenous peoples moving around on the blankets, as they use and occupy the land. A narrator (teacher or other adult) reads from a script while someone playing the role of a European (another adult) joins and interacts with those on the blankets.

As the script unfolds, participants respond to cues and prepared scrolls. At the end of the exercise only a few people remain on the blankets, which have been folded into small bundles and cover only a fraction of their original area.

Materials you will need

Blankets: One blanket for every 4–5 participants, as well as one blanket to be used to represent a residential school. Some people use sheets or fabric that has been designed with local art designs.

Map: A map of Turtle Island and direction cards (north, south, east, west) to place on the blankets (if desired)—these can be found at the end of the exercise.

Scrolls: The text for the scrolls is part of the script—copies of the individual scripts are included at the end of the exercise.



Small White, Yellow and Blue Cards (about 6 cm x 10 cm) as follows:

White cards—for a little less than half the participants. **Important:** with a small group (less than 22 people), give white cards to one-third of participants. With a very small group (12 or less), give only 2 white cards.

2 blue cards—for a small group (less than 22 people) give only 1 blue card.

3 yellow cards—one with an “X” on it.

Volunteers: One to be the narrator (usually the teacher or someone in a leadership role), and one to play the role of the European (usually an adult). An Indian Agent is included in this version of the Blanket Exercise. This role could be played by an adult or student.

Background Knowledge

To help children better visualize Turtle Island before and after European contact, we also recommend pre-discussion of Canada’s three Indigenous groups (First Nations, Métis and Inuit), along with what parts of Turtle Island they inhabited. A **map** is included at the end of the exercise. Explain that the students will learn how we went from a time when Indigenous peoples used all the land known as “Turtle Island” to the modern day situation when land reserved for Indigenous peoples is only a very tiny part of Canada...in fact less than one percent.

Beginning

Tell students that at the end there will be an opportunity for them to share their feelings in a respectful way. Remind them that we are role-playing a serious subject that affected real lives in serious ways. It is important to take the exercise seriously and not distract others.

Ask students to pretend to go back to a long, long time ago when only Indigenous people lived in Canada. As the children remove their shoes and step onto the blankets, let them know they’re stepping into the roles of First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples. Ask them to move around on the blankets—to use and occupy the land as if they were living on it. They might be hunting, gathering berries, fishing, traveling, trading, building homes or canoes, making tools or meals, etc.

Hand out the numbered scrolls to students who are comfortable reading aloud (teachers may want to give these students an opportunity to rehearse their parts). With a small group, some participants may need to read more than one scroll.

Script

Narrator:

I am the Narrator. I will be describing what is happening in the historical narrative you are taking part in.

Think of these blankets as the northern part of Turtle Island, or the land we now call Canada, before the arrival of Europeans. You are playing the part of the Indigenous peoples, the people who have lived here for tens of thousands of years; long, long before the arrival of Europeans. Turtle Island is your home and home to thousands and thousands of people like you. You live in hundreds of different nations. You fish and hunt and farm. You have your own language, culture, traditions, laws, and governments.

The land is very important to you. All of your needs including food, clothing, shelter, culture, and spirituality, are taken care of by the land. The blankets represent your land. Because the land gives you so much, in return, you understand you have a very serious responsibility to respect and take care of the land.

[Turns to person playing the European] Please introduce yourself.

European [reads in a loud, pompous voice, striding around the blankets]:

I represent the Europeans. We came to your country for the land, and everything on it—the buffalo, beaver furs, fish, trees, and other valuable resources of your nations.

Narrator:

And so began the so-called European “discovery” of Turtle Island.

[The European steps onto the blankets and begins shaking hands, handing out the white, blue and yellow cards and moving around greeting people.]

Narrator:

When the Europeans first arrived on Turtle Island they depended on you for their survival, and you helped them to survive and find their way around your land. In the beginning there was lots of cooperation and support between you and the Europeans, who are also called “settlers”.

European:

On the West Coast of Turtle Island, which we now call British Columbia, Europeans arrived about 200 years ago, in the early 1800’s. The First Nations and Europeans worked together in the fur trade in BC. The Hudson Bay Company traded goods such as knives, pots, blankets, and beads in exchange for furs from the Indigenous people.

Narrator:

At first the European settlers and their leaders looked at you as independent nations with your own governments, laws and territories. They made agreements or treaties with you. These treaties explained how you were going to share the land and the water, the animals, and the plants. For you, the Indigenous peoples, the treaties were very special and sacred agreements. They were statements of peace, friendship, and sharing, and they were based on respect and honesty. Sharing was very important to you. The hunters shared their food

with everyone and the families helped one another raise the children. In the treaties, you tried to help the Europeans understand what you meant by sharing.

[At this point, the European begins to slowly fold the blankets, making the blanket space smaller and smaller. The participants are reminded they must not step off the blankets.]

Narrator:

But after awhile, the Europeans stopped seeing things that way. They now had a different view of the treaties. For them, land was something that could be bought and sold, and treaties were a way of getting you to give up your land. You began to not get along so well with the Europeans. Things got even worse when the fur trade ended and the Europeans decided they wanted to start farming and settling the land. NOW, they wanted to take the land away from you.

European:

In British Columbia, fourteen treaties, or agreements to share the land, were signed with those of you who lived there. But often the process wasn't really fair to the Indigenous people because the two sides spoke different languages. The British did not speak your Indigenous languages, and you did not speak English. The Indigenous people did not really understand that they were signing land treaties that meant you were giving up your land. Many parts of BC still do not have treaties or agreements about how land will be shared.

Narrator:

Before too long, there were more Europeans than Indigenous peoples. One reason for this was the diseases Europeans brought with them. For example, by 1929 a horrifying 90% of the Indigenous population of BC had died.

[The Narrator asks those participants with white index cards to step off the blanket as they represent those who died of the various diseases.]

Narrator:

Please be silent for a moment to remember those who died from the European diseases.

[The European walks to the "south" and chooses two people who are standing close together.]

European:

You two represent the First Nations that were divided when the border between the United States and British Canada was created. This border divided communities and cut you off from each other. Please move to separate blankets.

[The European and the Narrator guide each person to a separate blanket, and then walk to the "west" where they choose one person who doesn't have a card.]

Narrator:

To make it easier for the settlers to move to the prairies and start farming, the government built the railway and bought a huge piece of land from the Hudson's Bay Company to give to the railways. This was very hard on some of you who were already living there, such as the Métis, Cree and Blackfoot. You, the Métis, fought for your land during the Red River Resistance and the North West Resistance. You won some of these battles but, in the end, you were defeated by the government's soldiers. You represent those Métis leaders who died in battle, were put in jail, or were killed. Please step off your blanket.

Choose one person only.

European:

James Douglas became Governor of British Columbia. He got land for the many settlers who were arriving by leaving you, the First Nations people, with only 10 acres per family. At the same time, settler families were receiving approximately 150 acres. Later, even more land was taken from you. You were given nothing in return. The governor said that First Nations didn't use, need, or own the land.

When Earl Dufferin came along as Governor General of BC, he tried to persuade the province to negotiate with you, the First Nations of BC. He said we Europeans need to recognize that First Nations have title to the land and that we do not have the right to touch an acre of it until we have made a treaty with them.

Narrator:

Even though Dufferin was trying to be fair, nobody listened to him. Nobody listened to the Nisga'a and Tsimshian (*Sim-SHE-an*) leaders either when they spoke to a government Joint Commission in 1887. They told the Commission:

Scroll 1: Our land

As the Nisga'a and Tsimshian, (*Sim-SHE-an*) we don't like what the Government is saying: that we will give you this much land. How can they give it when it is our own? We cannot understand it. They never bought it from us or our forefathers. They never fought and conquered our people and took the land that way. How can they say now that they will give us so much land—our land?

[The European and the Narrator walk to the "north".]

Narrator:

In the High Arctic, Inuit communities were moved from their homes to isolated and unfamiliar lands, often with very bad results. Imagine being suddenly moved from your community where your ancestors have lived for generations and where you were so well-connected to your food sources.

European [read to a grouping of people on a blanket]:

You represent people like the Inuit, along with many other Indigenous communities, who suffered because you were forced to move to an unfamiliar place. Please move one of the blankets away from the others, fold it small and sit down on it.

[The European takes a blanket, folds it small and directs the group to this blanket.]

Narrator:

Those with blue cards, step off the blankets. You represent those who died after being forced off your original land and away from your hunting grounds.

Narrator:

As more Europeans arrived, they needed more land. Many of the Europeans thought they (or their way of living) were better than other kinds of people, including you. Soon, they didn't think of you as friends and partners, but as a "problem" to be solved. The Europeans started ignoring or changing their laws to make it easier for them to take your land. As Indigenous peoples, you lost more than just your land. Because the land is so important to you, when it was taken away some of you also lost your way of living, your culture and, in some cases, your reason to live.

Scroll 2: Terra Nullius (TER-ah NOO-lee-us)

The idea of *Terra Nullius* means "land belonging to no one." European countries took this to mean they could send out explorers to find new lands and claim them for their country IF they were not being used. In Turtle Island, these were the lands used by us, the Indigenous peoples.

Narrator:

The land in Turtle Island wasn't empty and the Europeans knew it. So they decided to change the idea of *Terra Nullius* to include lands not being used by quote unquote "civilized" peoples or not being put to "civilized" use.

It was the Europeans, not the Indigenous peoples, who decided what it meant to be "civilized". The Europeans decided that because you and your people were not using the land in a "civilized way," they could take your land. It was almost impossible to stop them.

Scroll 3: The BNA (British North America) Act

The *BNA Act*, also known as the *Constitution Act*, 1867, created the country of Canada. It put "Indians and Lands reserved for Indians" under the control of the Canadian government. When this happened, it meant we as Indigenous peoples lost our rights and control over our own lands.

Narrator:

The *British North American Act* gave control of your lands to the Government of Canada, which at that time was made up of only people from Europe. You, the Indigenous people, were not involved in the creation of this law that would have such a devastating impact on your lives. More and more, the plan was to try and make you like the Europeans.

Scroll 4: The Indian Act

In 1876 all the laws dealing with Indigenous peoples were gathered together and put into the *Indian Act*. The *Indian Act* completely changed our lives. As long as our cultures were strong it was difficult for the government to take our lands. So, the government used the *Indian Act* to attack who we were as peoples. Hunting and fishing were now limited and our spiritual ceremonies like the potlatch, pow-wow and sundance were now against the law. This didn't change until the 1950s.

Scroll 5: *They decide*

“You can’t hunt deer except when the townsfolk are in the bush, during what they decide is the right time to hunt. You can’t bring down a bird to feed yourself when you’re trapping. You can only fish four days a week, and they choose the days... Now they only want us to eat what we buy in their stores or grow with their tools.”

—Dick Andrew, *George Manuel’s grandfather, Shuswap*

European:

Now hear this! According to the *Indian Act* of 1876 and the *British North America Act* of 1867, you and all of your lands are now under the direct control of the Canadian government. You will now be placed on reserves. Please fold your blankets until they are just large enough to stand on.

Narrator:

You went from being strong, independent First Nations, with your own governments, to isolated and poor “bands” that depended on the government for almost everything. You were treated like you knew nothing and like you couldn’t run your own lives.

You became the responsibility of the government. Through the *Indian Act*, the government continues to this day to deny you your basic rights. These rights are things like healthy schools, proper housing and clean running water.

European [walking slowly around the blankets]:

Also, you may not leave your reserve without permission. You need a permit to leave your reserve. You may not vote. You may not get together to talk about your rights. You may not practice your spirituality or your traditional forms of government. If you do any of these things, you may be put in jail.

Scroll 6: *Being treated equally*

“I know what the government did in the past; they said where we had to live. I know that we’re not treated equally now, because I can feel it. We’re all Canadians and we should all be treated equally.”

—Cassie, *from a Mi’kmaq community in Nova Scotia*

[The European should prepare a blanket far from the others for the residential school.]

Scroll 7: *Enfranchisement (en-fran-CHISE-ment)*

This means that all those First Nations people who became doctors, teachers, lawyers, soldiers or who went to university were no longer considered to be First Nations people by the government. This was called being granted “enfranchisement.”

European (choose one person and ask them to leave their blanket and stand somewhere on the floor):

You were enfranchised—this means because you became a First Nations teacher, lawyer, doctor, or veteran, you’ve lost your Indian status and have to leave your community.

Scroll 8: Assimilation

The government thought the “Indian problem” would solve itself as more and more Indigenous people died from diseases and others became part of the larger Canadian society.

Narrator:

You had to become more like the Europeans by giving up your rights to do as you wish. Instead you were forced to farm, go to school and pray in church like the settlers.

Scroll 9: Residential Schools

From the mid-1800s until the 1990s, the federal government took First Nations, Métis and Inuit children from our homes and communities and put them in boarding schools that were run by churches. As parents we didn’t have a choice about this, and neither did you. Sometimes the police arrived to take you away. These schools were often very far from your homes and you had to stay at them all or most of the year. Mostly you were not allowed to speak your own language and you were punished if you did. Often children weren’t given enough food.

Narrator:

Many Indigenous communities asked for schools for their children that would be close to home. The people in Spuzzum, where Gladys lived, wrote to ask for a school. Here’s part of their letter. It was written by Patrick Charley, March 13, 1925. Gladys would have been seven years old. (See photo in lesson 1)

Scroll 10: The Letter

Dear Mr. Indian Agent,

Please help us to get the school started as early as you can as we have twenty one children here old enough to go to school and a lot more small children will go to school as they get old enough to. I’m sending you a list of names of children on a separate sheet as you will see for yourself what to do. Please come down and see our school house, let us know when you can come or write to me and I will explain to Chief James and his people. Hoping to hear from you at an early date.

Yours Truly,

Patrick Charley

Scroll 11: The List

Walter Johnson
Helda Johnson
Maggie Johnny
Gladys Johnny
Francisco Johnny
Aleck Mack
Martin Mack

Narrator:

The school in Spuzzum was never built for these children. Instead, the government sent the kids who were on the list to a school outside their community and far away from their families.

All people with yellow cards raise your hands. You must now move to a separate, empty blanket. You represent those who were taken out of your communities and placed in residential schools far from your homes.

[The European should take the kids to the blanket.]

Narrator:

While some students say they had positive experiences at the schools, most of you say that you suffered from very bad conditions and from different kinds of abuse. Many of you lost connections with your parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Many of you didn't learn your language, culture, and traditions. Because you grew up in the schools away from your parents and rarely went home, many of you never learned how to be parents. Some students died at the schools. Many of you never returned home, or had trouble fitting back in if you did go home.

Sometimes the government would let the kids go home for Christmas, but only if your parents came to get you and got you back to the school on time. If you broke one of these rules, you wouldn't be able to go home the next Christmas.

Scroll 12: The Kamloops Indian Residential School Christmas holiday letter

"It will be your privilege this year to have your children spend Christmas at home with you. This is a privilege which is being granted if you observe the following regulations of the Indian Department... If the children are not returned to School on time they will not be allowed to go home for Christmas next year."

European:

The person with the yellow index card marked with an "X", please step off the blanket. You represent one of the thousands of children, like Gladys, who died at the schools or who died later as a result of your experience.

[Pause for the person to leave the blanket.]

Next, choose someone who was not alone on their blanket and ask them to return to their community. Say to them:

You can go home, but please sit down on the edge of your blanket while those in the community remain standing, or turn their back on you, to show how difficult it was to learn to fit in again once you went home.

Pause while this takes place.

Everyone else with yellow cards, please find a spot nearby on the floor. You represent those whose connection to your family and community was broken and you never made it home. Some of you ended up in cities, others ended up in prison due to your experience at residential school.

Narrator:

Please be silent for another moment to honour those who died, had trouble returning home, or who lost connection to their family and community because of residential schools.

European:

Thanks to the courage of the students who survived the schools, who we call “survivors,” Canadians started to find out about residential schools. In 2008, then Prime Minister Stephen Harper apologized for the residential schools. Here is part of what he said: “To the approximately 80,000 living former students, and all family members and communities, the Government of Canada now recognizes that it was wrong to forcibly remove children from their homes and we apologize for having done this. We now recognize that it was wrong to separate children from rich and vibrant cultures and traditions... and we apologize for having done this...”

Narrator:

But saying sorry means you have to change what you’re doing. The residential schools are not just part of our history. Children and grandchildren of people who went to the schools still feel the pain. Many former students are alive today and some have had a chance to tell their story to Canadians through something called the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission*. But Indigenous children are still treated differently. For example, your schools don’t get as much money.

Despite the Government of Canada’s centuries of efforts to make you like everyone else, as Indigenous peoples you have continued to resist and to pass down your languages, ceremonies, and much more.

Scroll 13: Resilience

We are healing ourselves and our communities. Out on the land, skills are being passed on to our youth. Mothers and grandmothers are bringing back ceremonies that honour women. Our leaders are using the courts to have our rights recognized and many of our nations are growing. We are strong, having survived hundreds of years of efforts to make us disappear. We have some amazing young Aboriginal leaders like Wab Kinew, a Canadian politician, musician, broadcaster and university administrator, Kevin Loring, a Nlaka’pamux actor and writer, Ta’Kaiya Blaney, a young singer/songwriter and environmental activist, and Khelsilem, a Squamish (*Skwomesh*) language leader to name a few.

Narrator:

This history, which some people call “colonization”, has left a lot of pain and caused a lot of hardship. We need to take action together. We have lots of children, youth, and adults to inspire us and bring us hope, from lots of different backgrounds and communities. Let’s work together to make a better Canada.

Scroll 14: Moving forward as friends

“If we move forward together as friends, then anything that you need I will help you to achieve it and anything I need you will help me to achieve it... Moving forward, if we are going to live together in this land, it is about forming friendships.”

*—Honourable Justice Murray Sinclair,
Chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*

Ask everyone to look around. At this point, there should be a few people sitting or standing on very small areas of blankets and a few more in areas where there are no blankets. Ask participants to remember what it looked like when they started the exercise and what it looks like now. Then invite everyone to take a seat, and continue with a talking circle, debrief or discussion.

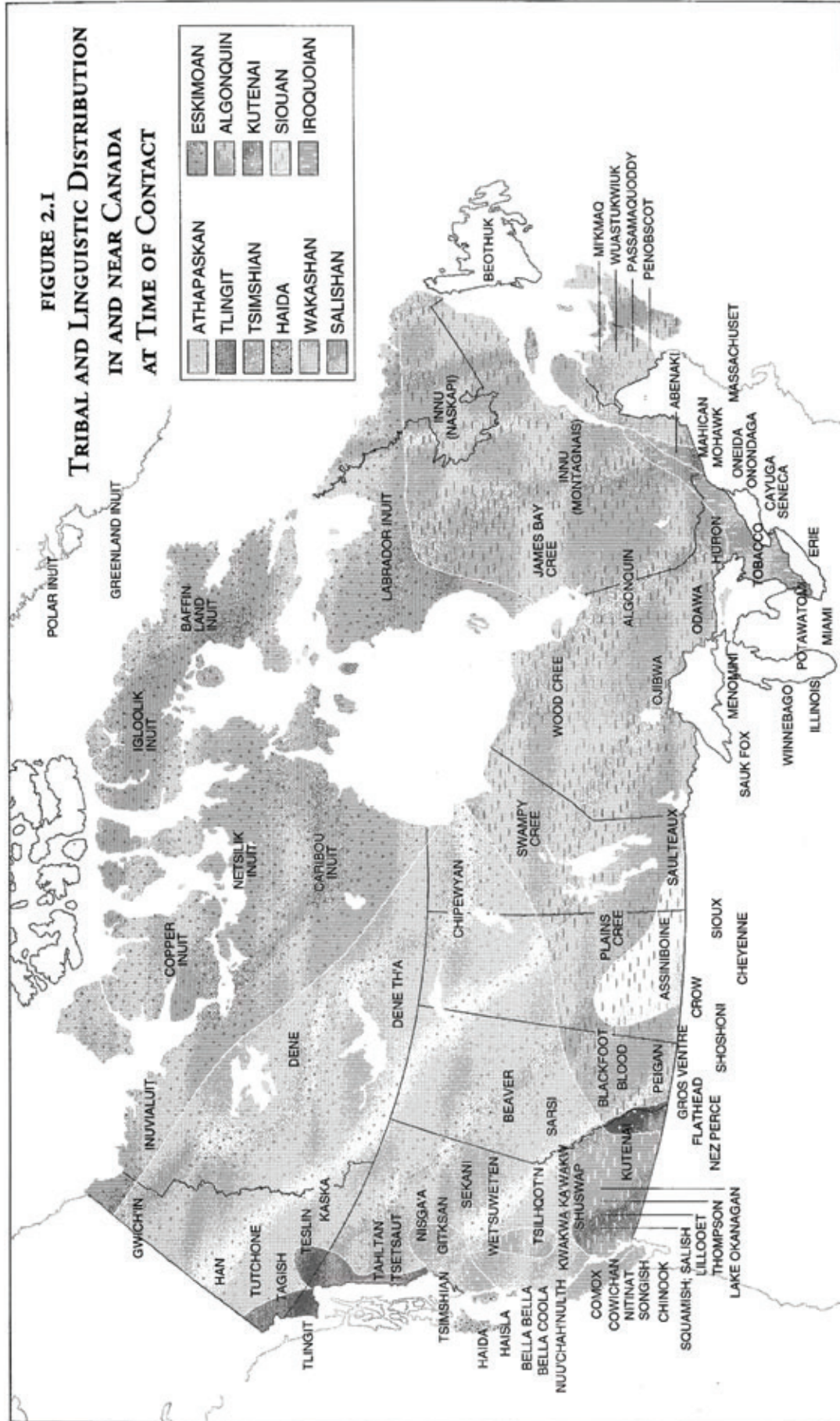
Important Notes

This discussion should last as long as necessary, ensuring all children have a chance to share their thoughts and feelings, and leave the session feeling OK about their experience. Some children may need reassurance.

Remind students that there are many positive things taking place today and we hope all of our students will be part of making Canada a better place for Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. We will be looking at some opportunities to create change in future lessons.

Turtle Island

Long before the arrival of Europeans, Turtle Island (North America) was home to countless millions of First Nations Peoples, who lived in thousands of distinct societies.

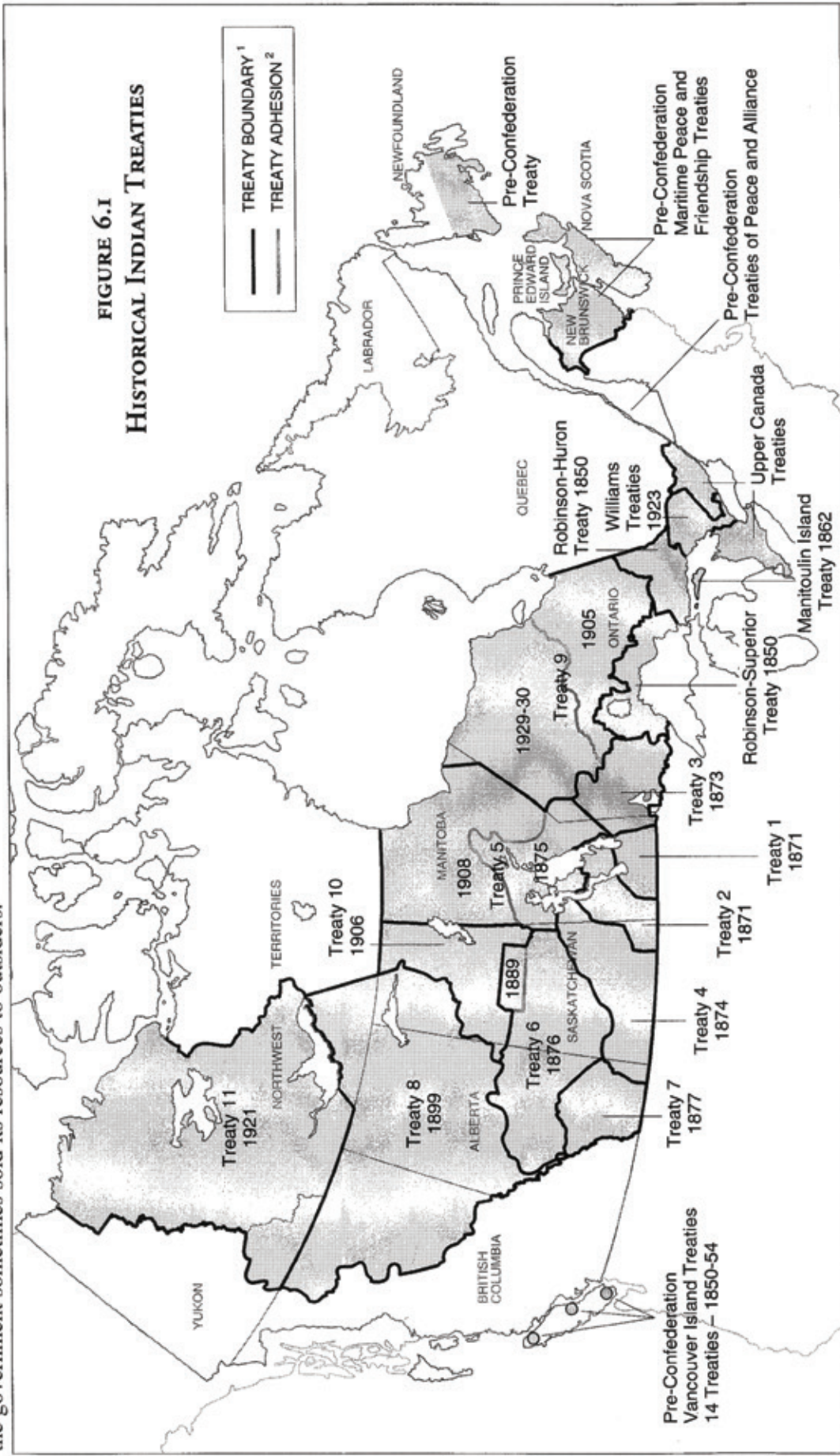


Note: The lines on the map separating the various tribal groups are not precise boundaries. The map provides a general picture of where populations were living at the time of first European contact.

Source: Adapted from Olive P. Dickason, *Canada's First Nations: A History of Founding Peoples from Earliest Times* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1992). Used with the permission of Oxford University Press. Adapted with the permission of the Minister of Public Works and Government Services Canada, and the Privy Council Office, 1997, from *Restructuring the Relationship, Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*.

Treaties

Land reserved for Aboriginal Peoples was steadily whittled away after its original allocation. Almost two-thirds of it has “disappeared” by various means since Confederation. In some cases, the government failed to deliver as much land as specified in a treaty. In other cases, it expropriated or sold reserve land, rarely with First Nations as willing vendors. Once in a while, outright fraud took place. Even when First Nations were able to retain reserve land, the government sometimes sold its resources to outsiders.



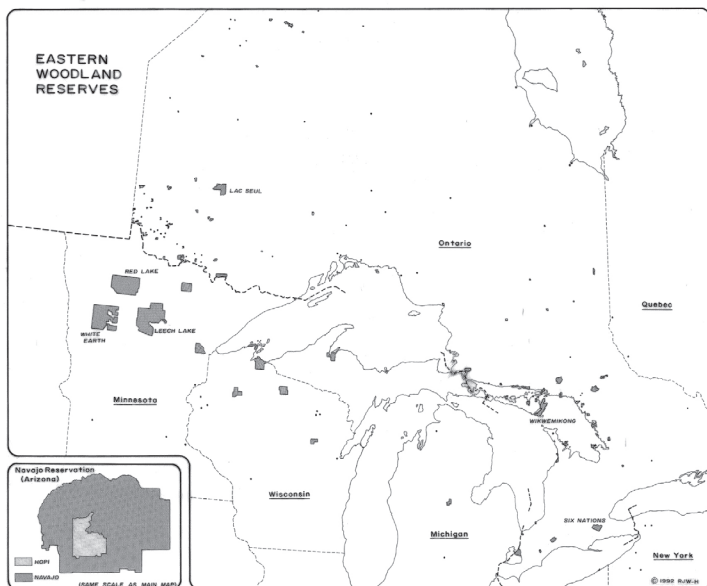
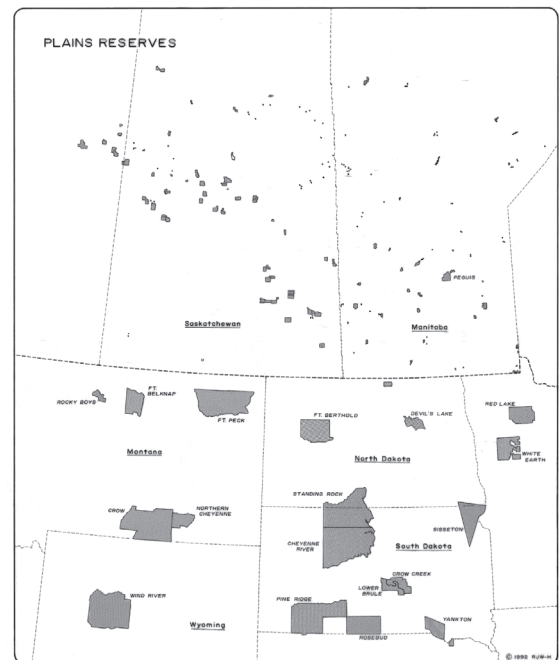
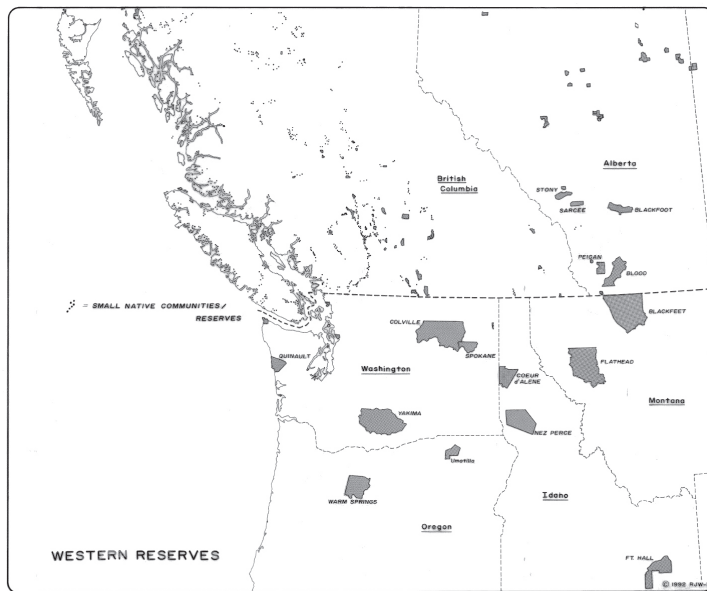
Notes: 1. Treaty boundary lines are approximate.

2. Extension of a treaty boundary as a result of later signatories who adhered to the terms of the original treaty.

Source: Information taken from the *National Atlas Information Services* map sheet number MCR4162©1991. Her Majesty the Queen in Right of Canada with permission of Natural Resources Canada. Adapted with the permission of the Minister of Public Works and Government Services Canada, and the Privy Council Office, 1997, from *Looking Forward, Looking Back, Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*.

Aboriginal Lands Today

Aboriginal lands south of the 60th parallel—mainly reserves—make up less than one-half of one percent of the Canadian land mass. By contrast, in the United States (excluding Alaska), where Aboriginal Peoples make up a far smaller portion of the population, they hold three percent of the land. All of the reserves in every province of Canada combined would not cover one-half of the reservation held by Arizona's Navajo Nation.



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NORTH

EAST

SOUTH

WEST