



Land Acknowledgments

in the Canadian Health Care Context

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September 2024

Holland Bloorview
Kids Rehabilitation Hospital

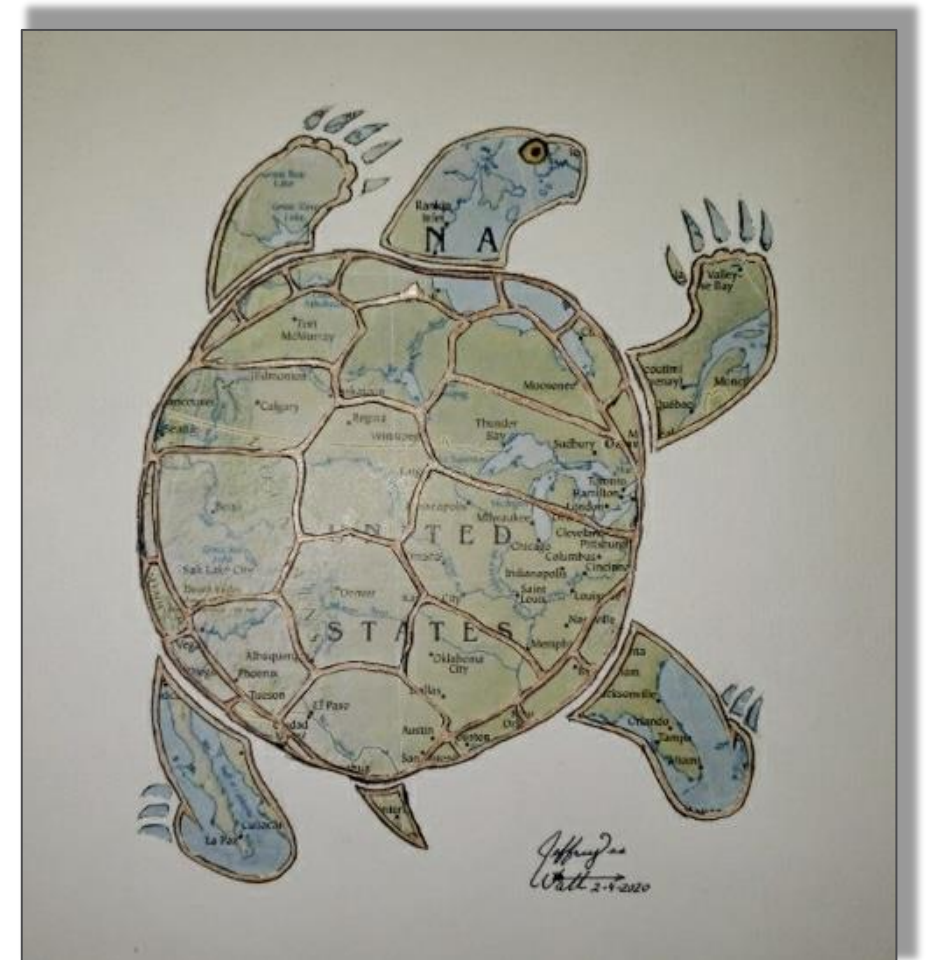
A world of possibility



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What are Land Acknowledgments?

- **Formal statement** delivered at the **beginning of events, gatherings or important meetings.**
- Typically recited by the **host** and/or **individual speakers.**
- **Recognizes and affirms** the **continuing presence of Indigenous Nations** as the **original inhabitants and stewards of Turtle Island (North America).**
- Intended to **remind the audience** of the **many historical injustices against Indigenous Nations** via **colonization**, including the **loss of culture, identity, and language.**
- **Locates the speaker's relationship** to the **land and Indigenous community.**
- **Identifies and expresses gratitude** for the **host community's contributions and stewardship.**



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Where do Land Acknowledgments Originate from?

- Land acknowledgments have origins from Australia and were traditionally known as “**Welcome to Country**” ceremonies.
- In the historical context, members of **another nation would wait at the border** to be ‘welcomed’ into the new Country. During that time, expectations would be set and those present would enter into **reciprocal diplomatic relationships**.
- Today in **settler institutional spaces**, they are known as “**Acknowledgment of Country**” statements.
- Became customary across Canada following the publication of the **TRC’s Final Report in 2015**.
- Uncertainty whether land acknowledgments developed among any First Nations of Canada.
(Some Indigenous scholars/knowledge keepers think not)



What is the Purpose of Land Acknowledgments?

- To **honour and express gratitude** for the distinct Indigenous Nations, especially for their **stewardship of the land** both past and present.
- To **disrupt the erasure of First Nations, Inuit and Métis culture and peoples across Turtle Island.**
- To **dismantle anti-racist and anti-Indigenous epistemologies** (ways of knowing) rooted in **settler colonial-imperial political thought.**
- To understand one's own **social location** and **relationship to the land and Indigenous community.**
- To exercise the **values and principles** espoused by the **Truth and Reconciliation Commission's 94 Calls to Action (2015).**



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Why are land acknowledgments important in health care?

- The **TRC 94 Calls to Action Nos. 18-24** speak directly to the health care sector, including the federal and provincial governments, **hospitals, health care workers**, in addition to **Canadian medical and nursing schools**.
- **Call to Action No. 23:**
 1. **Increase** the number of **Aboriginal professionals** working in **healthcare**.
 2. **Ensure retention** of **Aboriginal health-care providers** in **Aboriginal communities**.
 3. Provide **cultural competency training** for all **health-care professionals**.



What is land and Aboriginal People's relationship to land?

“The most prominent feature of the natural world that finds a place in human systems of law is **property**, and the most common form of property is **land**. Our **relationship to land** has been the subject of a variety of legal concepts, generally revolving around **the rights of the owner to exploit the resources thereof**. Since land forms the natural context within which communities exist, **our attitude towards land** forms an integral part of the *oikoumene*, and we should consider how we have viewed land legally.”

Vine Deloria Jr., Standing Rock Sioux First Nation
Activist, Author, Lawyer, Theologian



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What is land and Aboriginal People's relationship to land?

“As settlers replaced cultural lands – Aboriginal people had to abandon their traditional hunting, fishing and residential lands. They also saw their homelands restricted and often changed as a result of land purchase agreements, the treaty-making process, and the establishment of reserve” . . .


“The three traditional goals of Canada's policy toward Aboriginal people – protection, civilization, and assimilation – were all expressed through relocation at one time or another, reflecting attitudes as old as the relationship [between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal societies] itself.”

Part 1 – Chapter 11 “Relocation of Aboriginal Communities”
Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples



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Critiques of Land Acknowledgments

Scripted. Performative. No Follow-Up.



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Critiques of Land Acknowledgments

“There are some common elements to them all:

- (1) A recitation of at least one Indigenous Nation who is or was in the territory where the [institution] now sits;
- (2) No mention of how colonization violated Indigenous Peoples and their lands which are being acknowledged; and,
- (3) With very limited exception, no action-based words or stated commitments to change.”

Jeffrey Hewitt, Rama First Nation
Law Professor, Osgoode Hall Law School

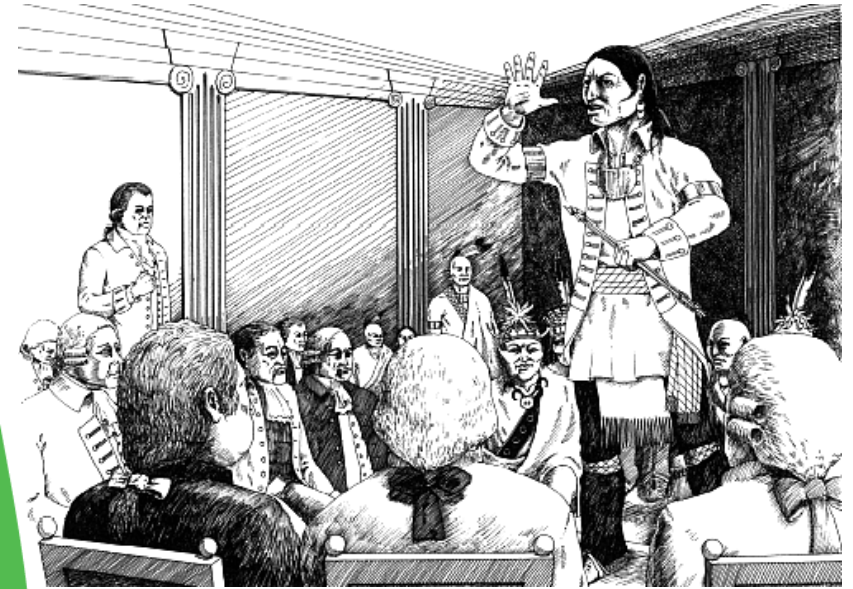


Scripted

- Most land acknowledgments are scripted.
- In many cases, the organizer or speaker reads from an approved institutional script.
- The scripts typically read like a history in land occupation.
- Scripts allow the reader to dodge critique if or when there are factual and/or pronunciation errors, in addition to where conflict arises on account of the land acknowledgement's recitation.

“Let us admit it, the settler knows perfectly well that no phraseology can be a substitute for reality.”

Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963)



Performative

“Acknowledging [traditional territory] must be about more than protocol, rhetoric, and a lovely sentiment.

Acknowledging traditional Indigenous territories means valuing that we are indeed Nations in concrete and real ways. It must mean valuing the stories Creator has, and we have, inscribed in our land and waterscapes as both marking our territory and as the beginning of our governance structures.

Acknowledging [traditional territory] must mean respecting our right to live off our land and the resources of the land and water so that we can build our own governance structures such as schools, medical institutions, and legal systems.”

Dr. Lynn Gehl, Algonquin Anishnaabe-Ikwe, Policy Options (2017)

“If it becomes routine, or worse yet, is strictly performative, then it has no meaning at all.”

Kevin Gover, Pawnee Nation of Oklahoma
Underscretary for Museums and Culture at the Smithsonian Institution.



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No Follow-up

- The recitation of land acknowledgments cannot, by itself, achieve reconciliation.
- Statements of thanks barely scratch the surface of traditional protocols.
- It is dangerous to even suggest that acknowledgments alone satisfy protocol in any way unless concrete action accompany the words spoken.

Chelsea Vowel, “Beyond Territorial Acknowledgments” (2016)

“Reconciling any relationship means admitting something is wrong and then setting about the sometimes awkward and tough work of changing the behaviour that resulted in the harm.”

Jeffrey Hewitt, Rama First Nation
Law Professor - Osgoode Hall Law School



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The Relationship in Historical Perspective

Institutional Anti-Indigenous Racism.



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What were Residential Schools?

- The three traditional goals of Canada's policy toward Aboriginal people were **civilization**, **protection**, and **assimilation**.
- The most well-known government methodology to achieve these policy objectives involved residential schools.
- Also known as **boarding schools**, **day schools** or **Industrial schools**, residential schools "constituted the most **extensive and persistent colonial system**" which **marginalized Aboriginal communities** within the federal government's **constitutional, legislative and regulatory structure**.
- The schools **systematically transformed Aboriginal people** into **Canada's wards of the state** and, eventually, into the objects of **social welfare, police, justice and health agencies**.



What were Residential Schools?

- Specifically, **residential schools** often **forcibly removed Aboriginal children from family** in order to accelerate Canada's **assimilationist agenda**.
- Under the supervision of **non-Aboriginal clergy and teachers**, the **residential school policy aimed to divorce children from the influence of Aboriginal parents** and ultimately from their **cultural identity**.
- From the government's perspective, residential schools **endorsed ostensibly benevolent objectives** which aimed to **prepare younger generations** for the **inevitable expansion of Western European political dominance** across Canada.
- In hindsight, however, the **good intentions** of state and **church-run residential schools** would eventually be eclipsed in the **shadow of disease and death**.

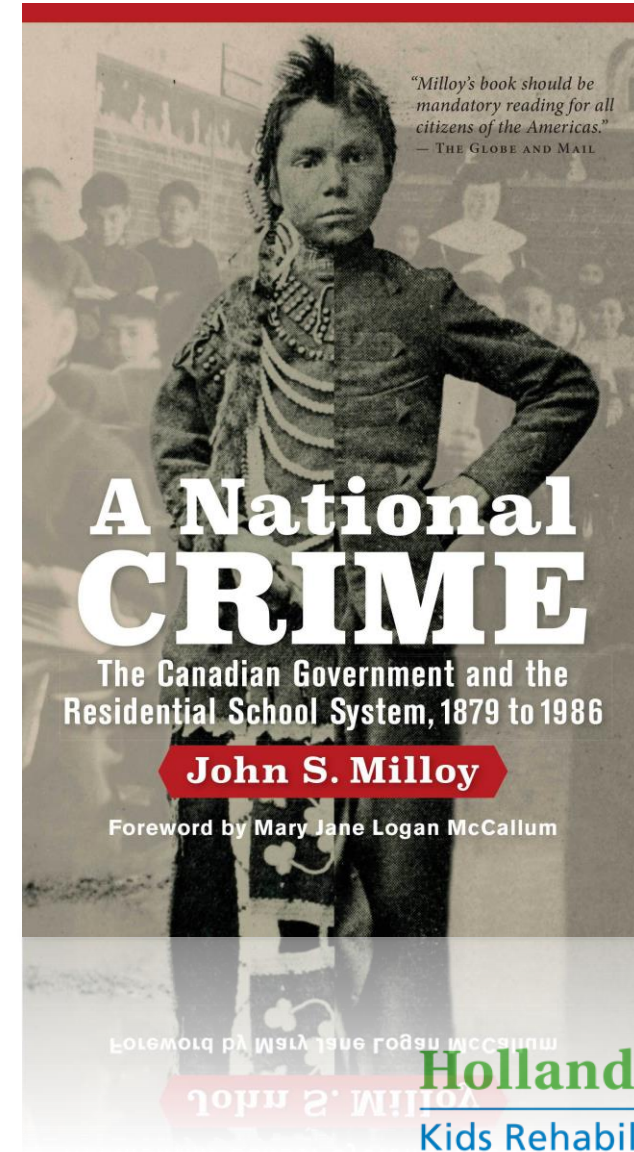


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What were Residential Schools?

- In his book, “**A National Crime: The Canadian Government and the Residential School System, 1879 to 1986**,” settler historian **John S. Milloy** characterized the **federal government’s policy** as inherently **reckless**, particularly in view of the schools’ overall **poor construction, over-population,** and inadequately funded operation and maintenance.
- Further, the **careless administration of health regulations and lack of medical services** ultimately contributed to **the untimely deaths of thousands of Aboriginal children.**



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What were Residential Schools?

- Likewise, the RCAP authors report that, “the **number of students who died at Canada’s residential schools** is not likely ever to be known in full.”
- Much of these gaps may be attributed to the **deliberate destruction of historical health records**.
- In the Summary of the TRC Final Report, the authors cite a January 2015 statistical analysis of the **Named Register for the period from 1867 to 2000 which identified at least 2,040 deaths**.
- However, the same analysis of combined **Named and Unnamed Registers identified 3,201 reported deaths**.



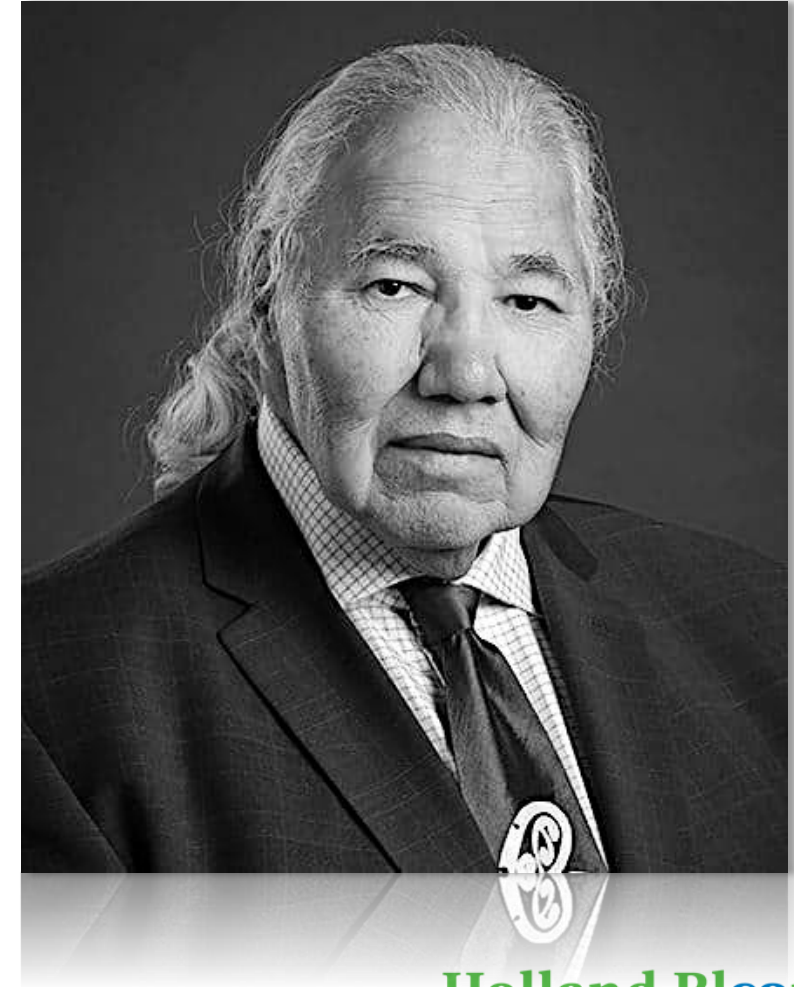
The Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement

- In 2006, the **Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement** achieved its formal approval from all parties and began the **formal process of implementation** on September 19, 2007.
- While marking a significant step towards **accountability and reconciliation**, the Agreement addressed only 138 of the federally-run schools – a fraction of an **additional estimated 1,000 schools operated by provinces as well as churches combined**.
- The recent discovery of **unmarked graves and burial sites** across Canada lends credence to this dismal theory and suggests that **actual figures far exceed** current publicly available statistical analysis.

May 8, 2006	
INDIAN RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS SETTLEMENT AGREEMENT	
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Unmarked Graves and Burial Sites of Aboriginal Children

- In a recent podcast entitled “**Reconciliation Reality Check**” (2021) esteemed Truth and Reconciliation Commissioner, the **Honourable Murray Sinclair**, argued that the **actual figures for child deaths** in residential schools **greatly surpass the numbers originally published** in federal government reports.
- Notably, Sinclair stated that “**150,000 kids went to 138 schools** in the Residential School Settlement Agreement. If **there’s an additional 1,000 schools**, then there is probably an **additional 1,000,000 kids that went to those schools.**”
- “And if we figure that **10-15% of kids who went to residential schools died**, then you do the math, we’re talking about **hundreds of thousands of kids dying in residential schools.**”



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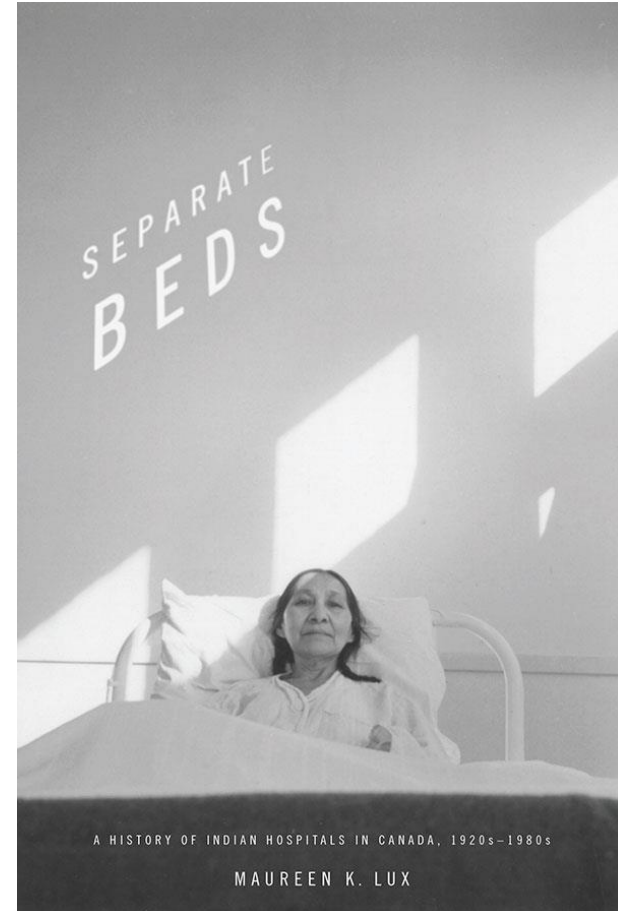
Special Interlocutor for Missing Children and Unmarked Graves and Burial Sites

- To **honour these discoveries**, the Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada announced the appointment of an **Independent Special Interlocutor for Missing Children and Unmarked Graves and Burial Sites** associated with Residential Schools on June 8, 2022.
- The **Special Interlocutor works closely and collaboratively** with Indigenous leaders, communities, survivors, families and experts to **identify needed measures** and to **recommend a new federal legal framework** to ensure the respectful and **culturally appropriate treatment of unmarked graves or burial sites of children** at former Indian residential schools and associated sites.
- As of May 31, 2024, the Interlocutor's **mandate was extended** to Fall 2024.



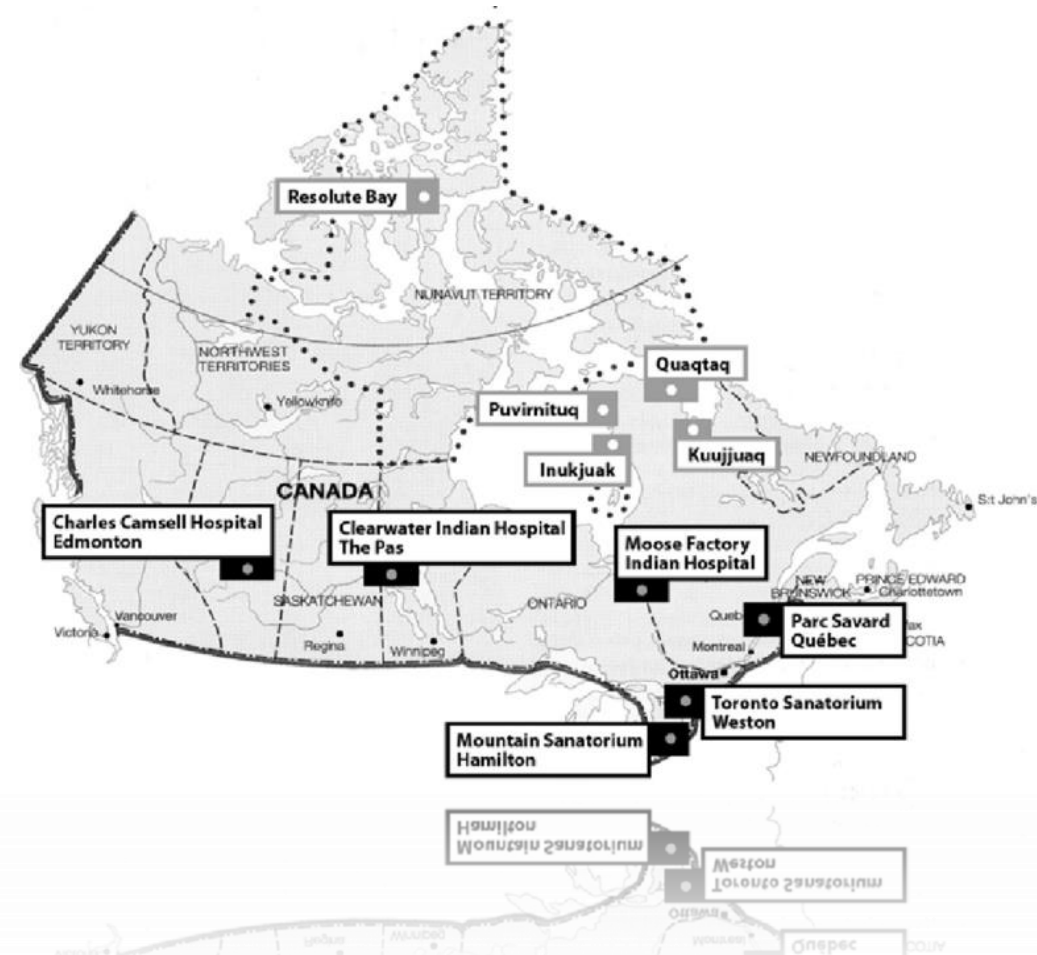
What were Indian Hospitals (Tuberculosis Sanitoria)?

- The lesser-known government methodology to achieve **Canada's social policy objectives** toward Aboriginal people equally materialized through **Indian Hospitals, also known as the Tuberculosis Sanitoria.**
- In her book "**Separate Beds**," settler historian **Maureen Lux** retells the troubling legacy of Indian Hospitals which operated **within several provinces during the 1920s until the late 1980s.**
- According to Lux, "Indian hospitals reflected the changing role of health care in **an emerging welfare state**, but they were also firmly rooted in persistent, century-long government policies that, regardless of political stripe, sought **to protect, civilize and assimilate Aboriginal people.**"



What were Indian Hospitals?

- Although government policy primarily aimed to protect Aboriginal populations from themselves, **the policies equally hoped to protect the expanding settler population from the purported deleterious effects of Indigenous health.**
- Through the **rampant displacement of Indigenous populations to reservations**, government officials sought to contain disease while simultaneously assuring Canadians **“that theirs was a humanitarian government that extended the benefits of modern health care and a ‘fair deal’ to the long neglected.”**
- However, by the 1930s, **reservations were no longer deemed adequate to contain the spread of disease.** Increasingly, medical discourse fixated on the threat of Aboriginal ‘contagions’ which **proliferated the notion of Aboriginal peoples as a “dying race.”**



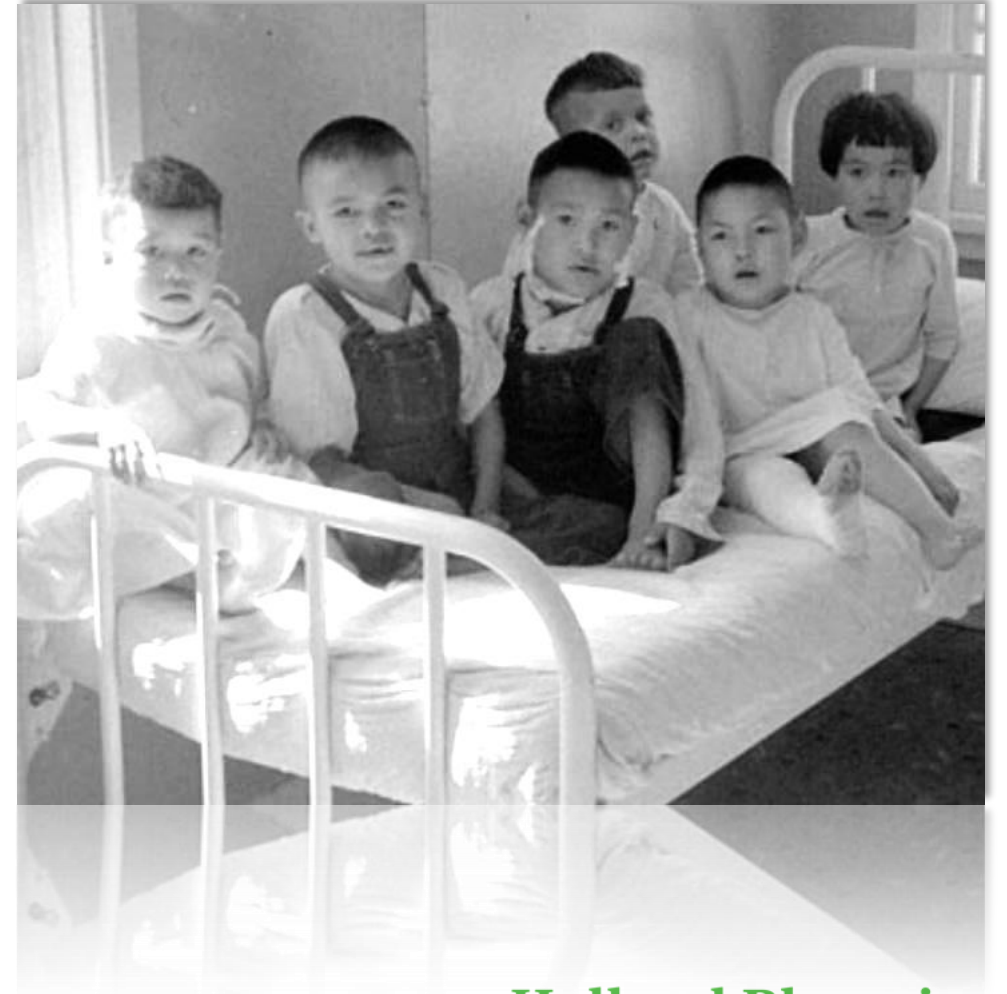
What were Indian Hospitals?

- By 1945, the **Canadian Tuberculosis Association** effectively designed the federally owned and operated Indian hospitals.
- These institutions not only isolated the alarming public peril of tuberculosis but also ensured that CTA's member institutions would continue to be **reserved for white patients**.
- In what generally amounts to a **federally-mandated segregated health care system**, Indian hospitals operated exclusively on reserves for **exclusively Indigenous patients**.
- While initially welcome by First Nations as an indication of the federal government's commitment to their public health obligations, Indian hospitals were **grossly underfunded**, and sometimes **lacked basic hospital infrastructure** such as **electricity, fire exits** as well as **isolation facilities**.
- Moreover, Indigenous patients endured harrowing experiences of coercion and abuse by hospital staff, nurses, and doctors.



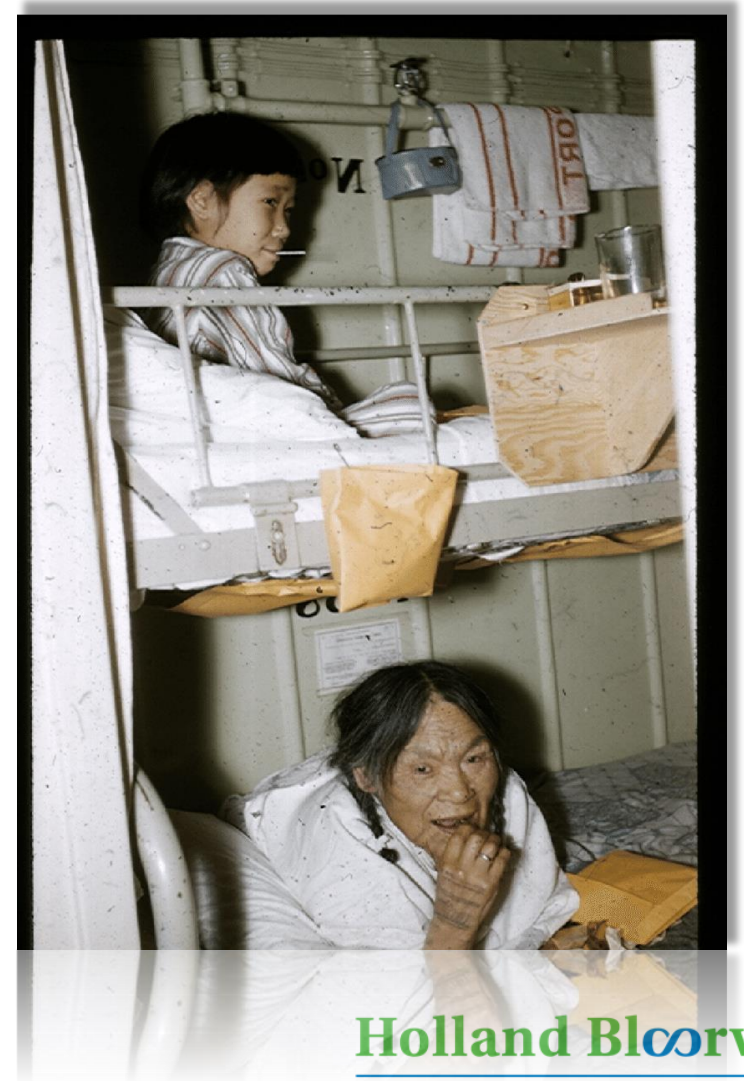
What were Indian Hospitals?

- In one account, William Tagoona, a five-year-old in the mid-1950s, spent eighteen months in the Clearwater Lake Indian Hospital in Manitoba.
- He recalled that when nurses read bedtime stories the children were told to keep their eyes on the nurse's face. If they looked away and were caught, 'she'd take her belt off and hit you with it.'
- The "goodnight kiss" was another strictly enforced duty. 'If a child turned his head away, then you'd get [the belt] again.'
- Tagoona recalled vomiting his plate of macaroni and recalled that "the nurse got really angry and mixed up the macaroni and vomit and force fed it to me."



What were Indian Hospitals?

- Much like residential schools, **the exact number of patient deaths at Indian hospitals** is not likely to ever be known in full.
- However, Lux records that, “[with] high death rates and few cures...[the hospitals] reflected not only the limitations of tuberculosis treatment in **the pre-antibiotic era**, but also **the practice of admitting the very ill in order to limit the spread of disease.**”
- Moreover, **recollections of abuse**, including being subject to **medical experimentation** and **forced sterilization** were disturbingly common among patient narratives.



Anti-Indigenous Racism in Canadian Healthcare Services

- **Brian Sinclair (b. 1963 – September 21, 2008)**
- **Location:** Winnipeg, Manitoba
- **Hospital:** Winnipeg Health Sciences Centre
- **Facts:**
 - 45 y/o First Nations double-amputee who used wheelchair.
 - Referred to WHSC after attending Winnipeg walk-in clinic.
 - Had bladder infection and blocked catheter.
 - Spent 34-hours unattended in the ER.
 - Observed at least 17 times by hospital staff or other patients.
 - Concerns about his conditions brought to nurses but ignored.
 - Sinclair died in ER and was not noticed for at least two hours.



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Anti-Indigenous Racism in Canadian Healthcare Services

- **Ruthann Quequish (b. 1986 – April 1, 2017)**
- **Location:** Kingfisher Lake FN (Northern Ontario)
- **Hospital:** Community Nursing Station
- **Facts:**
 - Attended the community nursing station in the hours and days preceding her death.
 - Suffered from an undiagnosed and untreated diabetic ketoacidosis.
 - Died at home without treatment.
 - Coroner inquest concluded August 16, 2024.
 - Jury proposes 42 recommendations to improve remote health care, including the implementation of a patient advocate.



Anti-Indigenous Racism in Canadian Healthcare Services

- **Joyce Echaquan (b. 1983 – September 28, 2020)**
- **Location:** Saint-Charles-Borromée, QC
- **Hospital:** Centre Hospitalier de Lanaudière
- **Facts:**
 - Mother of seven children.
 - Had heart problems – needed pacemaker.
 - She was not fluent in French.
 - Recorded hospital visits for translation assistance.
 - Sept 26: 200km journey to hospital by ambulance.
 - Given morphine – she was allergic to medication.
 - Livestreamed her hospital stay which captured the hospital staff berating and insulting her in French.
 - Died on September 28 of pulmonary edema.



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What is the Purpose of Land Acknowledgments?

- To **honour and express gratitude** for the distinct Indigenous Nations, especially for their **stewardship of the land** both past and present.
- To **disrupt the erasure of First Nations, Inuit and Métis culture and peoples across Turtle Island.**
- To **dismantle anti-racist and anti-Indigenous epistemologies** (ways of knowing) rooted in **settler colonial-imperial political thought.**
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How To Meaningfully Craft Your Own Land Acknowledgment

Factual. Personal. Action-based.

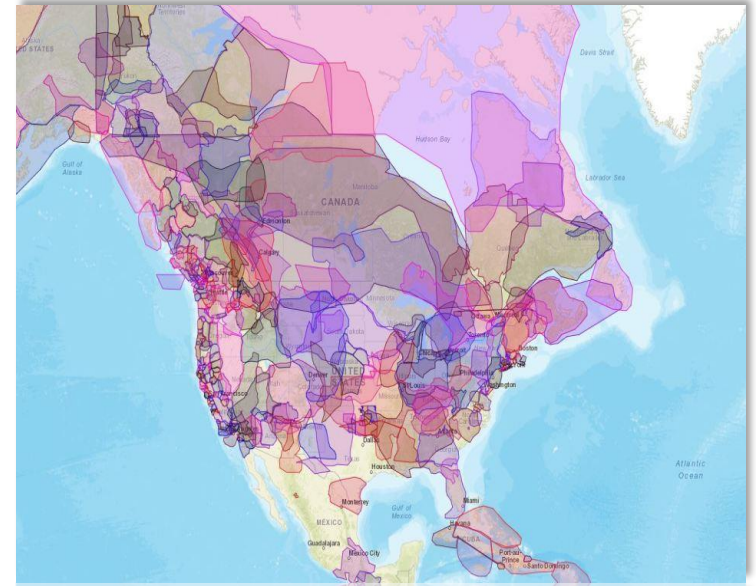


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Factual

- Check for accuracy – Research!
 - ❖ Native-lands.ca (Website)
 - ❖ First Story Toronto (Mobile App)
- Indigenous-Peer Review.
- Acknowledge sources, teachers, and Elders.

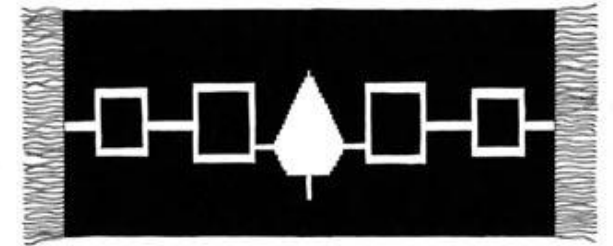


Personal

- Ground (locate) yourself.
- Check proper pronunciation.
- Practice.
- Lose the script.



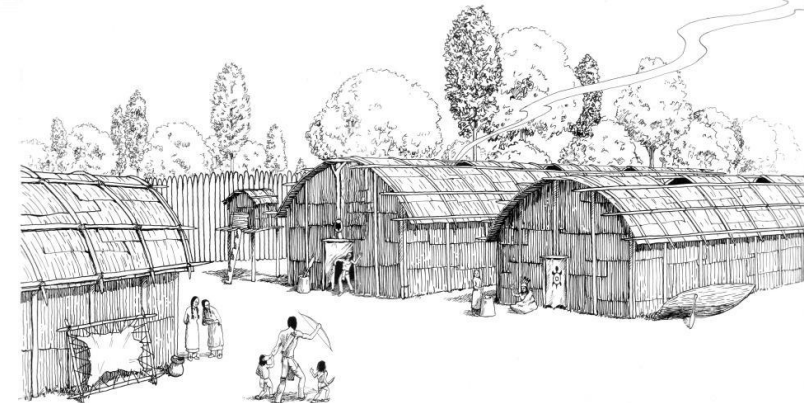
We the People



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Follow-up

- Acknowledge ongoing colonialism and cultural erasure.
- Respectfully seek a multitude of local voices.
- Learn local stories.
- Use Indigenous place names for modern cities/landmarks.
- Embrace discomfort, practice humility and compassion.



Sources

- John Borrows, “Wampum at Niagara” (1997) *Aboriginal and Treaty Rights in Canada: Essays on Law, Equality and Respect for Difference*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 155-172.
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Thank you

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