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“One of my favourite things about my culture is how we’re taught that everything on the Earth is to be respected. It’s an important part of the culture and covers everything. That includes respecting yourself. Respecting yourself is one of the most important things my culture has taught me. Also, the land, water, plants, air and animals are all very important to our culture and need to be respected. Without any of it, what would we be?”

—Kateri, a Mohawk youth from a community in Quebec

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“Where common memory is lacking, where people do not share in the same past, there can be no real community. Where community is to be formed, common memory must be created.”

—Georges Erasmus, Dene Nation, co-chair of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples

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Scroll 3:

Terra Nullius (TER-ah NOO-lee-us).

The idea of Terra Nullius, which in Latin means “land belonging to no-one”, meant European countries could send out explorers and when they found land, they could claim it for their nation. These were often lands we were using.

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The BNA (British North America) Act.

The BNA Act, also known as the Constitution Act, 1867, put “Indians and Lands reserved for Indians” under the control of the federal government. When this happened, we lost our rights and control over our lands.

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Indian Act.

In 1876 all the laws dealing with us 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.

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“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, a Mi’kmaq youth from a community in Nova Scotia

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Enfranchisement (en-fran-CHISE-ment).

Under this federal government policy, all First Nations people who became doctors, teachers, lawyers, soldiers or who went to university lost their legal Indian status. This was called being granted “enfranchisement”.

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Assimilation (ah-sim-ill-EH-shun).

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. As one government employee said, the government’s goal was “to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic and that there is no Indian problem and no Indian Department.” [Indian Affairs deputy superintendent Duncan Campbell Scott]

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Scroll 9: Residential Schools.

From the mid-1800s until the 1990s, the federal government took First Nations, Inuit and Métis children from our homes and communities and put them in boarding schools that were run by churches. The official partnership between the federal government and the churches ended in the 1970s but some churches continued to operate schools until the 1990s. We didn't have a choice about this. Sometimes the police arrived to take our children away. These schools were often very far from our homes and our kids had to stay at them all or most of the year. Mostly they were not allowed to speak our languages and were punished if they did. Often they weren't given enough food. The last Indian residential school closed in 1996.

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“You have to remember that the Canadian government has done a lot to Aboriginal people that was meant to make us become like Europeans. For example, in residential schools, my grandmother told me you couldn’t speak our language or you’d get beaten; you couldn’t see your parents – things like that. We didn’t have voting rights for a long time. We also lost a lot of our culture.” —Heather, a Cree youth from a community in Saskatchewan

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From the 1960s to the 1980s, thousands of First Nations and Métis children were forced illegally from their homes and adopted or fostered, usually by non-Aboriginal people. This period is known as the 60s scoop. Many of these kids experienced violence, racism and abuse and lost connection to their identity and culture. Like residential schools, the purpose of the 60s scoop was assimilation.

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Shannen Koostachin of Attawapiskat First Nation had a dream: safe and comfy schools for First Nations children and youth, and classes that respect First Nations cultures. She worked tirelessly to try to convince the federal government to give First Nations children a proper education and fair funding.

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Shannen said “I want to tell you what it is like to never have the chance to feel excited about being educated....It’s hard to feel pride when our classrooms are cold, and the mice run over our lunches and when you don’t have proper resources like libraries and science labs. You know that kids in other communities have proper schools. So you begin to feel as if you are a child who doesn’t count for anything... We want our younger brothers and sisters to go to school thinking that school is a time for hopes and dreams of the future. Every kid deserves this.”

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Scroll 14:

Broken promises.

Over the years, more than 70 per cent of the land set aside for us in the treaties has been lost or stolen and big companies are allowed to make lots of money from Indigenous lands and natural resources.

We, the Indigenous peoples get little but the pollution from any of the companies that don't respect the Earth and future generations are left to clean up the mess.

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We have language immersion programs and healing initiatives based on our traditional values. Our elders are passing on land-based skills to our youth and mothers and grandmothers are working to address violence in our nations by reinstating ceremonies that honour women. Our leaders are using the courts to have our rights recognized and many of our nations are growing. We see treaties as living agreements that, if respected, will allow people from all backgrounds to share the land peacefully and respectfully. We are strong and resilient having survived centuries of efforts to make us disappear.

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“Our leaders need to show the way, but no matter how many deals and agreements they make, it is in our daily conversations and interactions that our success as a nation in forging a better place, will ultimately be measured. It is what we say to and about each other in public and in private that we need to look at changing. ”

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

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