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# TEACH

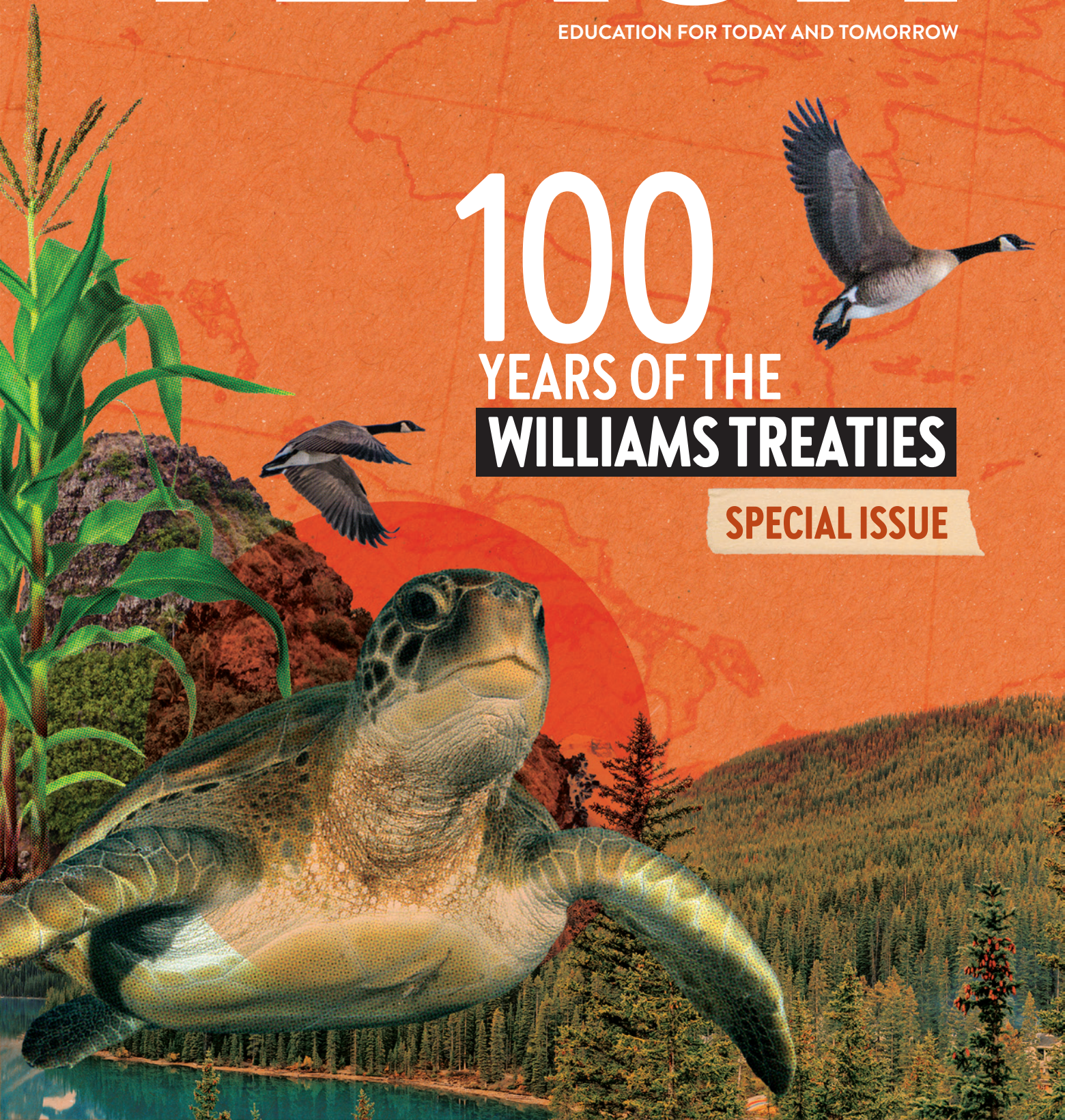
EDUCATION FOR TODAY AND TOMORROW

# 100

YEARS OF THE

**WILLIAMS TREATIES**

**SPECIAL ISSUE**







# HEALING THROUGH ART

●● *The Legacy of the Williams Treaties* ●●

*By Fiona Tapp*

**T**he Williams Treaties were signed between seven First Nations and the governments of Canada and Ontario 100 years ago, in 1923. They were the last historic land cession treaties and transferred nearly all the remaining Indigenous land in southern Ontario to the Crown. Their legacy continues to affect that land and the people who live on it today.

The Chippewa peoples of Rama, Beausoleil, and Georgina Island in the Lake Simcoe area signed between October 31 and November 7, 1923, with the Mississauga peoples of Alderville, Scugog Island, Curve Lake, and Hiawatha signing between November 15 and 21, 1923.

The Peoples who had lived in these territories for generations received one-time payments worth only a fraction of the lands' true value, and were no longer allowed to hunt, fish, or trap in areas outside of their reserves. As this latter condition was in stark contrast to previous treaties, it is now understood that the Indigenous signatories were misled and purposefully denied access to the land for traditional use.



The legacy of these treaties includes decades of harassment and arrests of Indigenous peoples who protested against the treaty conditions, arguing that they never agreed to relinquish their hunting and fishing rights. Several court hearings and lawsuits have also been fought over the treaties, the most recent of which was settled in [2018](#).



## *Making Space for Art*

As we reflect—through a lens of truth and reconciliation—on the Williams Treaties, their history, and their impact on the communities they affected, we grapple with issues of colonialism, land rights, and healing.

For some Indigenous peoples, healing is expressed through art. It not only offers a therapeutic medium to work through generational trauma, but also provides a tangible and powerful way to educate and move an audience in the form of a painting, sculpture, or traditional craft.

Karonhianonha “She Protects the Skies” Mikayla Francis, Wolf Clan of Akwesasne, is a performer and the Communications and Outreach Manager at the [Indigenous Arts Collective of Canada](#) (IACC). The collective provides resources and a space for Indigenous craftspeople and artisans to share their work and monetize their art—both through an online marketplace called [IndigenARTSY](#) and through live weekly auctions.

The IACC welcomes a wide range of art forms including singing and dancing, photography, pottery, and traditional crafts. It is also a community of Knowledge Holders and Keepers who come together at workshops and through an annual [Indigenous women’s art conference](#) to share traditions and keep customs alive.

“Having that moment to actually sit at the same table with an Indigenous Knowledge Holder where they’re sharing their art form with you, it’s so intimate,” says Karonhianonha Mikayla Francis. “It’s not even like teaching, it becomes experiential and inclusive, where you make a personal, real, and genuine connection [with an artist].”

Akwesasne is east of the Williams Treaty lands, but as Karonhianonha Mikayla Francis explains, these lines and borders that divide natural resources were imposed on the local Indigenous populations by settlers. In fact, Akwesasne stands as a vital witness to colonialism; it spans U.S. and Canadian lines and, as a sovereign nation, finds itself directly impacted by policies and decisions made in both countries.



## *The Relationship Between Land and Art*

For the seven First Nations impacted by the Williams Treaties, losing access to the land affected their survival, cutting them off from vital resources like clean water and crops. But it also disrupted their ability to create art and crafts that preserve cultural heritage.







This chipping away at traditional art forms amounted to cultural erasure, further compounded by the Canada-wide residential school system which aimed to assimilate Indigenous children by forbidding them from practising their customs or speaking their own languages.

The way the land is treated still impacts Indigenous peoples and affects their access to art supplies today. Karonhianonha Mikayla Francis notes that pottery makers in her area can no longer use their local clay due to toxicity in the water. Instead they have to purchase clay from elsewhere. These changes in the natural landscape have also affected the sweetgrass harvest needed by basket makers.

“People have naturally found their own healing journeys by reconnecting with traditional art forms, but it’s like our materials are vanishing in front of us because of outside governments and politics that have been forced on us,” she says.

Gathering the natural materials needed to create traditional art and crafts is crucial in the process of healing. As Karonhianonha Mikayla Francis explains, “The healing component is when you actually go out to get the materials, in the fields gathering sweetgrass. That connection with nature taking time to harvest, you can’t take those moments when you’re just buying things at Michaels. There’s that natural energy around the very beginning of the art forms.”

One of the artists who is featured on IndigenARTSY is [Brittany Kidman Boyle](#), from the Alderville First Nations. She creates beautiful handmade products that combine both contemporary beading, as well as more traditional leather work in moccasins, mukluks, and regalia making. Harvesting and gathering the materials is an important part of her process.

“My moccasins and mukluks are fully beaded and sewn by hand using artificial sinew,” she explains. “I use furs harvested locally by trappers here in Temiskaming Shores, as well as the furs my husband harvests. I also create birch bark and porcupine quill jewelry and medallions. I harvest the bark myself during the strawberry season as my teachings have taught me. And the quills are harvested from roadkill.”

Boyle includes her young four-year-old son when harvesting materials and plans to include her daughter too when she is old enough to understand the process and its significance.

“I have looked into the land rights for my hometown [and] nation of Alderville First Nations. I have a strong connection with the land when harvesting my materials. I always leave Sema (tobacco) for my harvest and never take more than I can use in the year,” she adds.



## *A New Way Forward*

In 2018, the governments of Canada and Ontario agreed to a settlement with the Williams Treaties First Nations. The settlement included financial compensation and confirmation that each nation had the right to hunt, fish, and trap on their land.

“Our ancestors have fought since 1923 to exercise our rights freely and without encumbrance and finally we have been able to secure this for our people and for future generations,” said Chief Kelly LaRocca of the Mississaugas of Scugog Island First Nation, in a press release following the announcement of the settlement. “It is a success for the Williams Treaties First Nations, but also for all Ontarians and Canadians who will see a new way forward in Crown-Indigenous relations.”

The process of truth and reconciliation involves deep introspection about our past. It also requires that we look forward by embracing what the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) call the Seventh Generation Principle, which teaches that decisions made today should stand the test of time and be sustainable at least seven generations into the future. We must ensure natural resources are preserved so that Indigenous culture, art, and values can be communicated to a new generation, revitalizing these once-threatened teachings.

Karonhianonha Mikayla Francis also works with the [Native North American Traveling College](#) to visit schools as a travelling troupe presenting Indigenous social song and dance—which can include dancers, singers, and storytellers—to educate both teachers and students. In



her own family, she enjoys watching her aunt, a fashion designer, make traditional regalia and ribbon skirts, and finds the process is both enriching and communal.

“It’s almost like a therapy session when everyone is beading together,” she explains. “It reminds me of how it would have been in longhouse days pre-contact, pre-colonialism. Just a long house full of family gathered around each other, your entire mother’s lineage. We’re supposed to be doing these art forms together, and that’s the way it was naturally pre-contact. Art reconnects us; it brings everybody back together. And that in itself is healing unknowingly.”

To connect with Indigenous artisans and craftspeople in the regions affected by the Williams Treaty and further across Canada, visit the following galleries and exhibitions:

- The [Art Gallery of Ontario \(AGO\)](#) in Toronto features artwork created by First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people.
- In Ottawa, see work from famed Indigenous artists like Carl Beam, Faye HeavyShield, and Shelley Niro at the [National Gallery of Canada](#).
- Purchase artwork and expertly created craft pieces from the [Indigenous Arts Collective of Canada \(IACC\)](#) or support artists from the Curve Lake community at the [Whetung Ojibwa Centre](#).
- To learn more about the process of truth and reconciliation and the legacy of residential schools, visit the permanent exhibition at the [Canadian Museum for Human Rights](#) in Winnipeg, the world’s first museum dedicated to human rights.



FIONA TAPP is a former teacher and school administrator of 13 years. She writes about education, parenting, and travel for a variety of publications including *National Geographic*, the *Globe and Mail*, the *Toronto Star*, the *Sunday Times*, and many more.

