

THE FRONT

7IDANSUU (JAMES M. HART)

Reconciliation Pole (2017), Photo credit: Steve van der Woerd

Warning: This statement contains distressing details on the death and abuse of children in the Indian residential school system.

ON MAY 27, 2021, Rosanne Casimir, the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc Kúkpi7 (chief) announced that the remains of 215 children had been found through a ground-penetrating radar investigation at the site of the former Kamloops Indian Residential School in British Columbia. This horrific revelation rocked the public sphere, garnering national and international media attention, prompting widespread outrage, organizational statements of condolence, and declarations of solidarity with Indigenous Peoples as well as a plethora of renewed commitments to pursue purposefully the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada's 94 Calls to Action issued to redress the legacy of residential schools.

For First Nation, Inuit and Métis families and communities in Canada, Kúkpi7 Rosanne Casimir's devastating announcement not only triggered an outpouring of grief, traumatic memories, makeshift memorials and healing practices, it confirmed what they have known and articulated from the beginning: residential schools were death camps formulated to eradicate Indigenous language and lifeways. Yet Indigenous knowledge of systemic institutional atrocities, including the death of children, was effectively erased for more than a century from the official settler-colonial histories that were mobilized by the nation state and its technologies of social reproduction like public schools and heritage institutions. Despite national strategies of repressive erasure, Indigenous communities have never forgotten the missing children. How could they? Survivors and descendants carry the multigenerational traumas and scars that cannot heal until the truth is known about the children – at the Kamloops site some of the remains are thought to be those of infants as young as three years old – who were taken from their family homes and incarcerated in

substandard educational institutions and exposed to regimes of physical, psychological, and sexual violence that were overseen by the cruel eye of the racist state and the repulsive hypocrisy of the altruistic Church. Healing will quicken when more truth is revealed, when the secrecy of these colonial institutions is exposed, when apologies and justice are enacted and when the remains of children are found, identified, and returned home for ceremony and burial.

Part of the process of redress and the healing – as the TRC’s Calls to Action note – involves commemorating the deceased children and creating commemorative artworks or public monuments to honour the survivors. One significant example is the spectacular *Reconciliation Pole* (2017) located on the University of British Columbia’s Vancouver campus. Carved from an eight-hundred-year-old *ts’uu* (red cedar) over a two-year period (2015–17), this unique pole was originated and executed by ʔidansuu (James M. Hart), the eminent Haida artist in collaboration with his team of gifted Haida artists: Gwaliga Hart, John Brent Bennett, Brandon Brown, Jaalen Edenshaw, Leon Ridley, Derek White, and – ʔidansuu and Rosemary Hart’s dear departed son – Carl Tilgidgaay Rodney Hart (1989–2015).

Monumental in scale, *Reconciliation Pole* is a narrative structure that is intended to be “read” from the base to the top. The three-dimensional visual story tells of the Time Before, the Time During, and the Time After the Indian residential schools. In the central section of the pole, the sculpture of the residential school is based on the Coqualeetza Industrial School near Chilliwack in British Columbia where ʔidansuu’s relatives, including his grandfather, great-aunts and uncles, were sent. Notably, this intimidating institution (est. 1886) was more than 1,600 kilometres from Haida Gwaii. On *Reconciliation Pole*, the children are depicted standing on top of the residential school, linking arms and holding on to one another for support; in some cases, they wear school uniforms and are marked with identification numbers. Their feet are not represented, indicating that they were not grounded during this time. With the desire to incorporate more communities into the narrative and the aesthetics of *Reconciliation Pole*, ʔidansuu invited other Indigenous artists to carve and paint the faces and bodies of the children, namely Zacharias Kunuk (Inuit); Shane Perley-Dutcher (Maliseet); Greg Hill (Mohawk); Phil Gray (Tsimshian/Cree); Susan Point and family (Musqueam); Kevin Cranmer (Kwakwaka’wakw); Christian White, Reg Davidson and Corey Bulpitt (Haida); and Sven Haakanson (Aleut). One child’s face is left uncarved – smooth and ghost-like to commemorate all the unknown Indigenous children who suffered and those who died in residential schools.



Figure 1. *Reconciliation Pole* (2017, detail), by 7idansuu (James M. Hart). Photo credit: Steve van der Woerd.

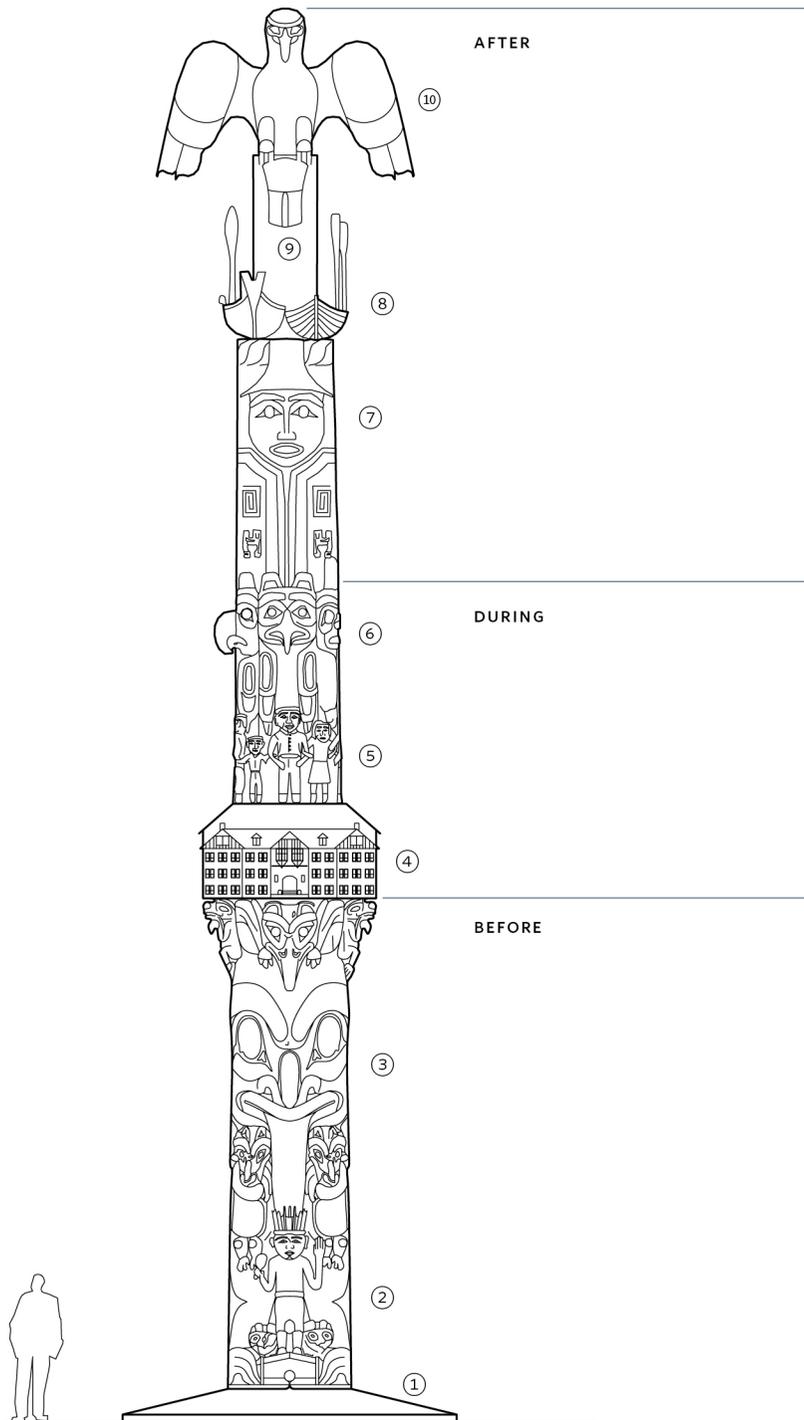


Figure 2. Reconciliation Pole diagram. Credit: UBC/DNA Engineering.

WHAT STORY DOES RECONCILIATION POLE TELL?

Haida poles are read from bottom to top.

- ① Surrounding the base of the pole are salmon symbolizing life and its cycles.
- ② Between the legs of Bear Mother is sGaaga (Shaman), who stands on top of Salmon House and enacts a ritual to ensure their return.
- ③ Bear Mother holds her two cubs, Raven looks out from between Bear Mother's Ears.
- ④ A Canadian Indian residential school house, a government-instituted system designed to assimilate and destroy all Indigenous cultures across Canada.
- ⑤ The children holding and supporting one another are wearing their school uniforms and numbers by which each child was identified. Their feet are not depicted, as they were not grounded during those times.
- ⑥ Four Spirit Figures: killer whale—water, bear—land, eagle—air, Thunderbird—the supernatural. They symbolize the ancestries, environment, worldly realms, and the cultures in which they are rooted, that each child came from.
- ⑦ The mother, father, and their children symbolize the family unit and are dressed in traditional high-ranking attire symbolizing revitalization and strength of today.
- ⑧ Above the family is the canoe and longboat shown travelling forward, side by side. The canoe represents the First Nations and governances across Canada. The longboat represents Canada's governances and Canadian people. This symbolism respectfully honours differences, but most importantly displays us travelling forward together side by side.
- ⑨ Four Coppers, coloured to represent the peoples of the world, symbolize and celebrate cultural diversity.
- ⑩ Eagle represents power, togetherness, determination, and speaks to a sustainable direction forward.

The copper nails covering areas of the pole are in remembrance of the many children who died at Canada's Indian Residential Schools—each nail commemorates one child.

In addition to the visual narrative, the materiality of *Reconciliation Pole* is suffused with cultural symbolism, from its red cedar body, through the abalone-inlaid headdress, to the four copper shields at the top which are coloured to denote Canada's cultural diversity. But the most poignant symbols of all are the thousands of copper nails, precious beings that are clustered on *Reconciliation Pole*: each one commemorates a child who died while at residential school. On the underside of the residential school, the copper nailheads are shaped into two haunting stylized



Figure 3. Left to Right: Rosemary and 7idansuu (James) Hart at the raising of *Reconciliation Pole* ceremony, April 1, 2017. Photo: UBC/Paul Joseph.

skeletons, symbolizing the children's bodies buried in the cemeteries of these negligent institutions. The TRC's official records estimate that about six thousand children died at residential schools, while other sources suggest tens of thousands more perished in them through maltreatment and neglect. In June 2021, just over a month after Kúkpí7 Rosanne Casimir's announcement of the 215 unmarked graves at the site of the Kamloops Indian Residential School – the largest of its kind

in Canada – the media reported that at least 750 unmarked graves have been found on the grounds of the former Marieval Indian Residential School in Saskatchewan on the ancestral lands of the Cowessess First Nation. Less than a month later, in July 2021, the Penelakut Tribe on BC’s Southern Gulf Islands informed other First Nation communities that 160 undocumented and unmarked graves have been discovered on the site of the former Kuper Island Residential School. To invoke the poignant words of Kúkpi7 Rosanne Casimir, “This is only the beginning, and there is still so much work to be done.”

At *BC Studies*, our hearts go out to Indigenous Peoples across Canada who are impacted by the legacy and trauma of the residential school system.

Nicola Levell, cover curator

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

7idansuu (James M. Hart) is an acclaimed, award-winning Haida artist and hereditary leader of the sdaŋ’a.aas Eagle clan at Old Massett, Haida Gwaii. His artworks – monumental sculptures, prints and jewellery – are found in public and private collections around the world. In British Columbia, his monumental sculptures include *Frog Constellation* (1995) at Simon Fraser University; a memorial pole at Old Massett (1999); *Respect to Bill Reid Pole* (2000) at the UBC Museum of Anthropology; *The Dance Screen (The Scream Too)* (2013) at the Audain Art Museum and more. He is especially known for his innovative and large-scale work in bronze casting such as *The Three Watchman* (2003, cast in 2010) at the National Gallery of Canada. 7idansuu holds honorary doctorates from Emily Carr University of Art + Design (2004) and Simon Fraser University (2017). He has been awarded the Order of British Columbia (2003) and the Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Medal (2013) and he was inducted into the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts in 2016.