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RECONCILIATION POLE

Nicola Levell

THE AMERICAN ART CRITIC and philosopher Arthur Danto asserted, “We erect monuments so that we shall always remember, and build memorials so that we shall never forget.”¹ Totem poles – archetypal symbols of Indigenous Northwest Coast culture – function as both monuments and memorials. They are bearers of oral histories and genealogies as well as commemorative markers of past events and deceased individuals. Raised in 2017 and standing seventeen metres high on the Main Mall of the Vancouver campus of the University of British Columbia (the unceded territory of the Musqueam First Nation), *Reconciliation Pole* is a memorial that tells the horrific history of Canada’s Indian residential schools and charges us never to forget as we move towards the future and reconciliation.

Canada’s Indian residential schools were in operation for over a century, with the last one closing in 1996. Their goal was assimilation of Indigenous children into the body politic: they were state-funded, often church-run institutions of physical violence and emotional and

sexual abuse. Government documents estimate that at least 150,000 First Nation, Metis, and Inuit children passed through the residential school system. On arrival, they were generally given a haircut, a uniform, an Anglicized name, and an identification number, and they were prohibited from speaking Indigenous languages. With callous disregard for human rights, Indigenous children were torn from their families and stripped of their social skin, identity, and culture; they were denied access to their community frameworks and practices of collective memory. The multigenerational effects of this loss and trauma are still starkly visible, lived, and felt.

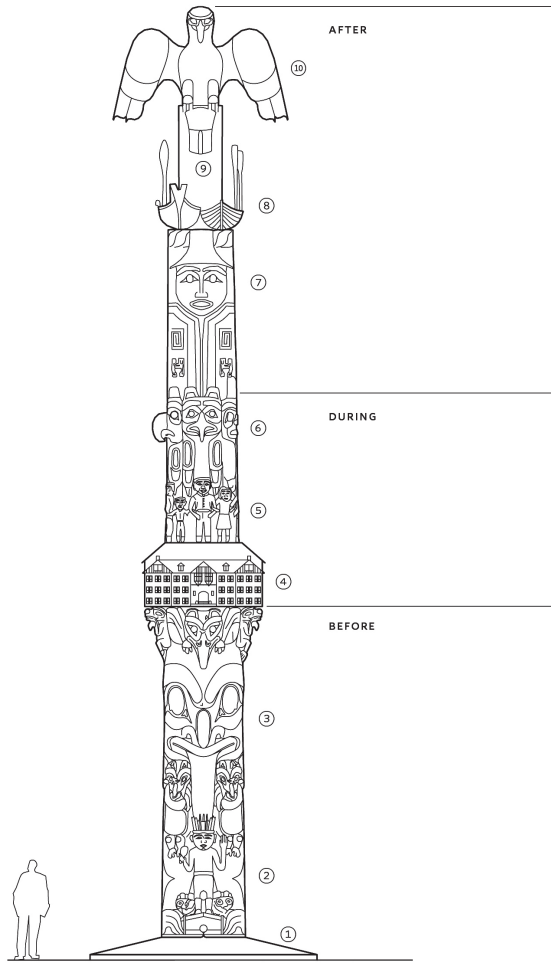
How can memorials, such as *Reconciliation Pole*, play a role in the process of healing and acknowledging Indigenous peoples' historical experience, memory, and loss? How can memorials educate, inspire hope, and reshape public memory, as Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, or the TRC, anticipates? How can collective remembrance of a shameful past be transformed into artistic expression, affirmative action, and constructive dialogue as we chart a course for reconciliation? To address these questions, it is insightful to explore not only the material and visual symbolism of *Reconciliation Pole* but also the collective-memory practices and protocols of the ceremony that marked its installation on the UBC campus. Monumental outdoor artworks, including memorials, are often overlooked and passed by; they depend on public engagement, commemorations, rituals, and ceremonies to bring them to life.

The idea of memorials as potent and affective sites of collective remembrance, healing, and reconciliation is detailed in Volume 6 of *The Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of*

Canada: “True reconciliation can take place only through a reshaping of a shared, national, collective memory of who we are and what has come before ... As Canadians gather in public spaces to share their memories, beliefs, and ideas about the past with others, our collective understanding of the present and future is formed. Public memory is dynamic – it changes over time as new understandings, dialogues, artistic expressions, and commemorations emerge.”

On April 1, 2017, thousands of people gathered on UBC’s Vancouver campus to participate in the ceremony “Reconciliation Pole – Honouring a Time Before, During, and After Canada’s Indian Residential Schools.” This public event, which unfolded over the course of five hours, was envisaged as an opportunity for Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants to come together to witness and to remember the injustices of the past and the present, to raise the pole, and to foster collective memory and intercultural understanding, as part of our shared commitment to reconciliation. The catalyst for this ceremony of public remembrance and healing was the extraordinary *Reconciliation Pole*. Carved on Haida Gwaii from an eight-hundred-year-old *ts’uu* (red cedar) over a two-year period (2015–17), this unique pole was designed and executed by 7idansuu, James Hart, a Haida master carver and hereditary chief of the Saanggalth Stastas Eagle Clan, along with his team of carvers: Gwaliga Hart, John Brent Bennett, Brandon Brown, Jaalen Edenshaw, Leon Ridley, Derek White, and his late son, Carl Hart. Like other Haida monumental poles, or *gyáa’aang*, *Reconciliation Pole* – said to be the largest, if not the tallest totem pole in existence – is a narrative structure. In this case, it is intended to be “read” from the bottom up, and the

WHAT STORY DOES RECONCILIATION POLE TELL?



Reconciliation Pole diagram. Photo by DNA Engineering. Courtesy of UBC News.

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.

visual narrative is organized into three sections: “Before,” “During,” and “After” the Indian residential schools.

The representation of the residential school in the central section of the pole is based on the Coqualeetza Industrial School. The school opened in 1886 near Chilliwack, British Columbia, and 7idansuu, James Hart’s relatives, including his grandfather, great-aunts, and uncles, were sent there. In *Reconciliation Pole*, children stand on top of the school, linking arms and holding on to one another for support; in some cases, they wear uniforms and are marked with identification numbers. Their feet are not represented, indicating that they were not grounded during this time. In a conscious move to incorporate other Indigenous peoples into the narrative and the aesthetics of the pole, 7idansuu, James Hart invited ten Indigenous artists, from Canada and the United States, to carve and paint the faces of the children and embellish their figures.² One child’s face is left uncarved – smooth, ghost-like, without features – to denote and remember all the unknown children who suffered in Indian residential schools.

In addition to the visual narrative, the materiality of the pole is richly infused with cultural meanings and symbolism, from its red cedar body, through the abalone-inlaid headdress, to the four copper shields at the top, which are coloured to symbolize 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, copper nailheads are shaped into two haunting, stylized skeletons, symbolizing the children’s bodies buried in the cemeteries of these negligent institutions. The TRC’s

official records reveal that more than six thousand children died at residential schools, while other sources suggest tens of thousands more perished in them through maltreatment and neglect. In an act of collective remembrance, residential school survivors, members of their families, and many other Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants hammered the copper-bodied nails into *Reconciliation Pole*.

Survivors of the Indian residential school system spoke at the *Reconciliation Pole* ceremony. Their speeches were suffused with painful childhood memories of cruelty and abuse. At the same time, the speakers conveyed a sense of optimism, which reflected the vitality, resilience, and strength of these First Nations Elders and their cultures. In accordance with First Nations protocol, the ceremony began with a Musqueam welcome, enunciated in hən̓q̓əmi̓n̓əm̓ and English by s̓ʔəyələq Elder Larry Grant, who welcomed Indigenous and non-Indigenous guests to the Musqueam Nation's unceded ancestral lands. This welcoming was followed by official speeches by Musqueam and Haida chiefs and councillors, by UBC president Santa Ono, and by the Indian residential school survivors. Linc Kesler, director of UBC's First Nations House of Learning and senior adviser to the president on Aboriginal affairs, acted as master of ceremonies. Throughout the afternoon, there was mindful attention to Indigenous protocols and diplomacy in speeches and actions: welcoming, honouring, songs, dancing, gifting. Highly visible was ceremonial regalia: woven blankets and hats, inlaid headdresses and ornate accessories, painted rattles and drums. These forms of regalia are also represented on *Reconciliation Pole*. In the upper section, "After," the family group is depicted wearing

regalia, which symbolizes the revitalization of Indigenous cultural heritage, practices, and memory.

To historically contextualize the structure of the commemorative ceremony and understand its significance for reshaping collective memory and reconciliation, it is important to acknowledge that the Musqueam and other Salish First Nations do not have a tradition of totem pole carving. For many decades, it was insulting and hurtful for them to witness the installation of these memorial and territorial markers, belonging to northern groups such as the Haida, on their unceded territories. Institutions of the colonial past and recent present failed to acknowledge Musqueam title and rights to their ancestral land: Musqueam people were not consulted on what was placed on this land, done with it, or extracted from it. At the *Reconciliation Pole* ceremony, repeated reference was made to the Indigenous protocols of hosting, nonadversarial understanding, and mutual respect. Elder Larry Grant and Wayne Sparrow, elected chief of the Musqueam Indian Band, both acknowledged and thanked the Haida Nation, UBC, and everyone present for following proper protocol.

Another reference to Indigenous protocol, rooted in First Nations frameworks and the practices of community memory, was the call for us to bear witness. The act of bearing witness, which was articulated in official speeches and in the printed program of the ceremony, is identified in the directives of the TRC as a fundamental “Aboriginal principle” to be adopted as we move towards reconciliation and forge new relationships. Unquestionably, witnessing is a purposeful act that contributes to the formation of collective memory. As witnesses, we are charged to actively remember, to assume an ethical responsibility,

to publicly recall and transmit the knowledge of that which we are invited to observe. Although the TRC's cooption of witnessing as a pan-Indigenous principle has been critiqued by scholars, its employment in the case of *Reconciliation Pole* was culturally appropriate because witnessing is an established, historical, and contemporary dimension of Indigenous ceremonial practices on the Northwest Coast, including pole raisings.

While the act of witnessing respects Indigenous memory practices and teachings, it is important to recognize that the tenets of reconciliation are contested by some Indigenous scholars and communities. The Metis academic, curator, and artist David Garneau argues that the idea of reconciliation, in the Canadian context, is deeply flawed because reconciliation means repairing relationships that were once amicable and harmonious. He also points out that the TRC's project of reconciliation is based on non-Indigenous practices of healing and closure, which are focused on the individual testimonies of victims rather than those of perpetrators. He directly relates this "confessional" mode of disclosure to a colonial, Catholic ideology. In moving forward, he recommends that we reframe the dialogue, between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, as a process of conciliation. Conciliation is an alternative dispute-resolution process that brings parties together to work through problems and differences and find mutually acceptable solutions. So, Garneau asks, "How are we to change the sites of Reconciliation into sites of Conciliation? How do we prevent Reconciliation from being primarily a spectacle of individual pain for settler consumption and Aboriginal shame?"³

Reconciliation Pole played and will play a part in this collective

process of reshaping public memory and conciliation. The raising of the pole had impacts that were felt – through emotion and sensory experience, through engagement and empathy – between and among Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants. The ceremony constituted an act of coming together in the same space to witness and remember; to listen to the speeches; to observe the blessing of the pole and the carver’s dance; to pull the ropes and raise the pole; to watch the dancing and feast together. These activities were embraced with the possibility of moving forward together. This future course was captured in the words of Adina Williams, a UBC student from the Squamish Nation who was the last speaker before the pole raising. The daughter of a residential school survivor, grounded and calm, she spoke: “My parents, as survivors, have used that strength and resilience to help me become the proud Squamish and ‘N̓amgis person I am today. Before I left the house this morning, my parents reminded me that just me standing here today, and being able to speak to you and share how I think we can move forward together towards a reconciled future – that is an opportunity that my parents did not have. It is gatherings like these that leave me very hopeful for a future for my children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren.”

This hope for the future is expressed on the top of *Reconciliation Pole* in the form of the majestic eagle about to take flight. It represents, to recall 7idansuu James Hart’s words: “The power and determination needed to look towards the future.”⁴ He further contends, “We still need to move forward ... Canada needs to stand up ... not just apologizing, but really acknowledging what happened in the past, so it doesn’t ever happen again.”⁵ In moving forward, it is vital that *Reconciliation Pole*

continues to be engaged with as an artistic expression and as a site of remembrance, learning, and dialogue. In this way, this unique memorial will help shape collective memory and mutual understanding; it will help ensure, as Danto explains, that we never forget the losses suffered, the victims, and the horrors of the past.

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NOTES

- ¹ Arthur C. Danto, "The Vietnam Veterans Memorial," *The Nation*, August 31, 1985, 152.
- ² These artists are Corey Bulpitt (Haida), Kevin Cranmer (Kwakwaka'wakw), Reg Davidson (Haida), Phil Gray (Cree), Sven Haakanson (Aleut), Greg Hill (Mohawk), Zacharias Kunuk (Inuit), Shane Perley-Dutcher (Maliseet), Susan Point (Musqueam), and Christian White (Haida).
- ³ David Garneau, "Imaginary Spaces of Conciliation and Reconciliation: Art, Curation, and Healing," in *Arts of Engagement: Taking Aesthetic Action in and beyond the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*, ed. Keith Martin, Dylan Robinson, and David Garneau (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2016), 29.

- ⁴ Leslie Dickson, "Reconciliation Pole Installed on UBC Vancouver Campus," *UBC News*, March 30, 2017, <https://news.ubc.ca/2017/03/30/reconciliation-pole-to-be-installed-on-ubc-vancouver-campus/>.
- ⁵ Hadani Ditmars, "A B.C. Reconciliation Totem's Lessons on How to Move Forward," *Maclean's*, June 30, 2017, <http://www.macleans.ca/news/canada/a-b-c-reconciliation-totems-lessons-on-how-to-move-forward/>.