

Invisibility, Space and Monument: Activism through Absence

Yoobin Shin

University of Toronto

Master of Arts

Abstract:

Can we have an activist movement through silence? This paper attempts to question the fundamental Western notion of activism through a recent memorial/art installation by a Vancouver-based Haida artist, Tamara Bell. Installed at the steps of the Vancouver Art Gallery's southern entrance in 2021 in response to the discovery of the remains of 215 Indigenous children on the grounds of the former residential school in British Columbia, Canada, pairs of shoes were displayed, each to represent those missing children. Discursively engaging with Avery F. Gordon's theorization of *Ghostly Matters* and *Haunting*, Bell's installation is not simply regarded as a memorial and art installation; rather, it redefines itself as an activist movement through the silence without having any corporeal involvement of humans in the place. Through the quiet haunting of the ghosts of children conjured up from the displayed shoes, it visualizes the history of invisibility and inequality placed Indigenous peoples under the structure of colonization. At the same time, the author examines the strategic location of the installation, which breaks the silence of the place and unsettles spatial relations that are established between the former and current Vancouver Law courts, intervening in the history of the Canadian legal system and calling forth the reconciliation with the Indigenous Peoples. Bell's installation stands still today in its place, becoming a monument - this shows a hope to continue to memorize the plain of children, not to be forgotten again.

Key words:

Indigenous Art, North America, Installation, Memorial, Haunting, *Ghostly Matters*, Colonialism, Activism, Silence, Resilience, Monumentalization, Spatial Relation.

Death exists in the past tense, disappearance in the present.¹

————— Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (2008)

On May 28, 2021, as the summer breeze began to blow, 215 pairs of kids' shoes suddenly appeared on the stairs at the southern entrance of the Vancouver Art Gallery (Fig.1). The shoes were displayed on the stairs side-by-side, each fashioned with bright colours of pink, yellow, blue, and green, as if representing children's playful and lively smiles. On their designated spots, these shoes stood still, watching the countless passersby who walk across from Howe Street to Hornby Street or vice-versa. Vancouver-based Haida artist Tamara Bell and her twelve-year-old son created this installation in honour of 215 Indigenous children whose remains were discovered unprotected on the grounds of the former Kamloops Indian Residential School in British Columbia, Canada.² Through the construction of this installation, Bell hoped to create a communal space or memorial site for the public to express their grief on the children's tragic end and to remember the pain that the children had to endure at the time of their death. Since the installation was displayed at the site, it has been subsequently augmented with flowers, stuffed animals, small toys, candles and messages of condolence. These offerings have become friendly companions to children's shoes, providing unconditional love and care. In addition, the

¹ Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 113.

² Maddi Dellplain and Jen St. Denis, "In Their Shoes: Community Creates a Symbol of Mourning for Those Killed in Residential Schools," *The Tyee*, June 2, 2021, <https://thetyee.ca/News/2021/06/02/Shoes-Activists-Create-Symbol-of-Mourning-Residential-Schools/>. In this paper, a significantly large number of non-scholarly sources, mostly news articles, are referenced more than the scholarly articles and publications for two reasons: first, since the discovery of unmarked graves of the children happened in our recent time and the story has not yet unfolded, the number of published scholarly articles that address it in detail is far lacking in the current state of affairs. Second, the news articles I referenced here were written at the same time when the event began to be broadcasted throughout the country, which means that the content and language appeared in the articles bear an immediate (re)action of not just the Indigenous peoples and other Canadians but also of the news reporters and writers who aim to provide an objective view.

Indigenous communities/nations across Canada have joined in blessing the shoes with tobacco, medicines, and songs for healing and protection of the souls' journey.

The discovery of the remains of 215 children, some as young as three years old, immediately sparked a national reckoning and a demand to initiate a geological survey with ground-penetrating radar at the sites of other former residential schools. After a series of searches, more than 1,800 confirmed and suspected cases had been identified across the country as of January 25, 2022.³ The following regions, mostly cities in western Canada, confirmed undocumented and unmarked graves of Indigenous children: Williams Lake (BC, St. Joseph's Mission Residential School); Cranbrook (BC, St. Eugene's Mission School); Kuper Island (BC); St. Joseph's (Alberta, Dunbow Industrial School); Battleford (Saskatchewan); Muscowequan (Saskatchewan); Regina (Saskatchewan, Regina Indian Industrial School); Brandon (Manitoba, Brandon Residential School); Shubenacadie (Nova Scotia, Shubenacadie Residential School).⁴

Among the residential schools where the geological survey team conducted their search, the Cowessess First Nation in Saskatchewan announced on June 24, 2021 the largest discovery of 751 unmarked burial sites at the former Marieval Residential School.⁵ Following Bell's artful commemoration through the installation, memorials constructed with kids' shoes have gradually emerged in other cities in Canada as well. Created by the First Nations and Indigenous communities with the help of local residents, the sites chosen for the memorials have been determined based on their spatial relation to the history of settler-colonialism that caused such harm. These include the federal and provincial government buildings, as well as Catholic

³ Michael Lee, "Where Searches for Remains are Happening at Former Residential School Sites," *CTV News*, January 25, 2022, <https://www.ctvnews.ca/canada/where-searches-for-remains-are-happening-at-former-residential-school-sites-1.5754222>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Kelly Skjerven, "Estimated 751 Unmarked Graves Found at Former Saskatchewan Residential School," *Global News*, June 24, 2021, <https://globalnews.ca/news/7977208/marieval-residential-school-unmarked-graves-2/>.

churches such as the steps of City Hall in Victoria and Saskatoon, the Francis Xavier Mission Catholic Church in Kahnawake and the Centennial Flame at the Parliament Hill in Ottawa (Fig. 2).⁶ This movement to construct memorials with children's shoes has even spread beyond Canada. For the global awareness of this recent tragedy, Amanda May Daly, a photographer and a filmmaker of Anishinaabe and western European ancestry, organized a memorial on the steps of Canada House in London's Trafalgar Square.⁷

When the news reports on the unmarked graves of Indigenous children were first published in the summer of 2021, they garnered significant media attention in Canada and around the world. Social networking platforms, including Instagram and Facebook, spontaneously amplified the story of violent treatment that the victims had endured during their time in the residential schools. Despite such sudden, massive media attention, only a few media coverage has been made on the memorials since April 2022.⁸ However, Bell's installation at the Vancouver Art Gallery remained until May 2023.⁹ Indigenous communities set up a tent next to

⁶ Lisa Risom, "Prince Albert Memorial Honours 215 Children whose Remains were Found on Site of Former BC Residential School," *CTV News*, May 31, 2021, https://saskatoon.ctvnews.ca/prince-albert-memorial-honours-215-children-whose-remains-were-found-on-site-of-former-bc-residential-school-1.5450306?cid=sm%3Atrueanthem%3Actvsaskatoon%3Apost&utm_campaign=trueAnthem%3A%20Trending%20Content&utm_medium=trueAnthem&utm_source=facebook&fbclid=IwAR2dC5I9isDoGwNB3ovRCW5KwjlbJY1APdDo9u8AxhHeNZTvC2HEqXLF3tA. & "Kahnawake Residents Create Memorial for 215 Children Found Buried at B.C. Residential School," *CBC News*, May 30, 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/kahnawake-residents-create-memorial-for-215-children-1.6046193>. & "Parliament Hill Memorial to Residential School Children Taken Down," *CBC News*, October 22, 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/shoe-memorial-residential-school-victims-parliament-hill-ottawa-1.6221556>.

⁷ Amanda May Daly, "UK Vigil for #215children & victims/survivors/families," Facebook, June 6, 2021, https://www.facebook.com/events/970065480429846/?acontext=%7B%22ref%22%3A%2252%22%2C%22action_history%22%3A%22%7B%5C%22surface%5C%22%3A%5C%22share_link%5C%22%2C%5C%22mechanism%5C%22%3A%5C%22share_link%5C%22%2C%5C%22extra_data%5C%22%3A%7B%5C%22invite_link_id%5C%22%3A616376173089625%7D%7D%22%7D.

⁸ Both Google and the University of Toronto library search engine do not show any news articles in the last three months that deal with either memorials or the unmarked graves of the lost children.

⁹ CBC News, "Makeshift Residential School Memorial at Vancouver Art Gallery has been Removed," May 19, 2023, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/makeshift-residential-school-memorial-at-vag-removed-1.6849653>. The original essay was written in April 2022 when the memorial was still remained under the protection of the Indigenous communities. The original phrase here was "However, Bell's installation at the Vancouver Art Gallery stands still today," which was edited to current version in May 2023, reflecting the current situation.

the installation to keep their vigil over the children's shoes. Every day, the children were protected and their deaths were memorialized, so they would not be forgotten.

In an interview with *CityNews*, Nahanee, who identifies herself as an Indigenous mother, raised questions while standing in front of the memorial at the Vancouver Art Gallery: "Who are these children? Who are they? Can the children's remains be properly buried with their mothers? Can they be brought home to their families?"¹⁰ The question of *who they are* remains unanswered, as the identification of the individual children has been deterred due to the lack of school records and first-hand data, says Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond, the director of the Indian Residential School History and Dialogue Centre at the University of British Columbia.¹¹ What further obscures the search, according to Chief Rosanne Casimir from the Tk'emlupé te Secwepemc First Nation, is that the residential schools never documented the deaths of children.¹² At Bell's installation, the owners of children's shoes are thus left unknown. They are absent, nowhere to be found. In the midst of the busy city, silence emerges from the emptiness of shoes, and that has continued to suffuse the surrounding since May 2021.

In this paper, the aesthetic of disappearance that manifests from the absence of human presence is examined in relation to the essential constituents of activism. The popular, easily accessible web-sources and academic references all speak of the most fundamental constituent of activism: *bodily engagement of people*. Thus, activism with whatever motive, first and foremost,

¹⁰ Lisa Steacy, "'To Not Let Them be Forgotten': Vancouver Memorial Created after 215 Children's Remains Found in Kamloops," *CityNews: Everywhere*, May 28, 2021, <https://vancouver.citynews.ca/2021/05/28/vancouver-memorial-kamloops-children-residential-school/>.

¹¹ Nick Wells, "Churches' Refusal to Release Records Hinders Identification of Buried Children," *Canada's National Observer*, June 3, 2021, <https://www.nationalobserver.com/2021/06/03/news/church-Catholic-refusal-release-records-hinder-identification-buried-children-Turpel-Lafond>.

¹² Wynne Davis, "The Remains of 215 Indigenous Children Have Been Found at a Former School in Canada," *The NPR*, May 29, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/05/29/1001566509/the-remains-of-215-indigenous-children-have-been-found-at-a-former-school-in-can>.

requires human presence — that is, the occupancy of space filled with individuals — to plan out every minute detail of the entirety of movement: aim/goal, physical site, date, duration, etc.¹³

This essay reconsiders the fundamentality of human presence in initiating activism through the analysis of Bell’s memorial in Vancouver. What if there are no people? Can we still see an activist movement that occupies physical space and brings about change without any visible human involvement? In other words, in what ways does absence substitute humans’ corporeal mass to participate in rethinking/subverting the existing mode of power and providing alternative visions for the future?

In writing this essay, as a person and settler of colour in Canada, I would like to state my positionality and responsibility since the study itself is a sensitive topic for those who identify themselves as members of Indigenous communities/nations. Throughout the paper, I position myself as “a politicized ally — a comrade — to Indigenous peoples in their struggles for justice and freedom in the settler-colonial present,” following what Jaskiran Dhillon encourages in her article.¹⁴ Thus, I write the essay with a sincere desire to stand with Indigenous folks and to work towards shared political ends. Moreover, I will attentively take into consideration the theorization of refusing research set forth by Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang. Tuck and Yang

¹³ “Activism,” Merriam-Webster, accessed April 14, 2022, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/activism?src=search-dict-box>. “Activism,” Oxford English Dictionary, accessed April 14, 2022, <https://www-oed-com.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/view/Entry/1957?redirectedFrom=activism#eid>. T. V. Reed, *The Art of Protest: Culture and Activism from the Civil Rights Movement to the Present* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), xii-xiii. <https://doi.org/10.5749/j.ctvb1hrctf>.

Approaching the definition of activism broadly, one of the well-known sources, Merriam-Webster, suggests that activism is “a doctrine or practice that emphasizes vigorous, direct action, especially in support of or opposition to one side of a controversial issue.”[#] In a similar vein, the Oxford English Dictionary defines the term as “the policy of active participation or engagement in a particular sphere of activity; specifically, the use of vigorous campaigning to bring about political or social change.”[#] From a scholar’s point of view, T.V. Reed’s book also provides his definition on activism as “the unauthorized, unofficial, anti-institutional, sustained collective actions of ordinary citizens trying to change their world that has shaped politics, culture, and political culture as much as any other single force ... social movements have been a *moving* force [Italicized by the author]

¹⁴ Jaskiran Dhillon, “Notes on Becoming a Comrade: Indigenous Women, Leadership, and Movement(s) for Decolonization,” *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 43, no. 3 (2019): 41.

present refusing to research as an act of refusing to collect, extract, and re-write/narrate the pain and humiliation of those who suffered from the violence of settler-colonialism. By doing so, it is not to be a spectacle of the settler-colonial scientific gaze that has codified the course of research in social science and that has sustained academic.¹⁵ The research must, therefore, scrutinize the very structure that has propelled and permitted such a brutal reality. Through Tuck and Yang's framework, my research seeks to probe the power and institutions that lie beneath the memorial: the Vancouver Art Gallery, which was a former Vancouver Law Courts building.

"I look for her shape and his hand"— Haunting and Ghostly Matters¹⁶

As fragile as the children's bodies were, their fragmented bones were uncovered at the sites of residential schools, confirming their physical presence and life on this land. At the memorial raised by Bell, each pair of shoes symbolizes one of those missing children. *Why shoes?* Bell's use of shoes as a material surrogate of young children raises a question about her intention behind her object selection. In this paper, I wish to avoid the inclusion of stories and archives of victims' pain narratives as the focus of the methodological approach. Instead, I attempt to use Avery Gordon's engagement with Patricia Williams' autobiographical essay, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* (1991), to foster a critical examination of the absence that emerges from the shoes at the memorial. In Gordon's publication, she pays particular attention to one of the phrases that appears when William tries to trace legal inequality through the story of her great-great-grandmother, who was an enslaved Black person and endured the control over her body by her owner, Austin Miller, who became the father of her children and was an established

¹⁵ Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Unbecoming Claims: Pedagogies of Refusal in Qualitative Research," *Qualitative Inquiry* 20, 6 (2014): 812-14.

¹⁶ Patricia J. Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: Harvard University Press, 1991)

Tennessee lawyer and jurist at that time. The phrase is, “I look for her shape and his hand.”¹⁷ According to Gordon, the phrase and William’s engagement with it are a “massive project, very treacherous, very fragile” that cajoles us to search for the shape of absence(s) — the ghost/apparition. For Gordon, investigating absences can potentially reveal “conditions in the past banished certain individuals, things, or ideas, ... [and] circumstances rendered them marginal, excluded, or repressed. The lost is only apparently absent because the forced ‘disappearance’ of aspects of the social continues to shadow all that remains.”¹⁸ Therefore, the ghost is not an imaginative hallucination of a dead or missing person but a social figure that opens up the complexity and density of social relations. Being haunted by the ghost leads us to arrive at the dialectically interlocked forces of the social structure where the ghost has resided. As Gordon states:

The ghost or the apparition is one form by which something lost, or barely visible, or seemingly not there to our supposedly well-trained eyes, makes itself known or apparent to us, in its own way, of course. The way of the ghost is haunting, and haunting is a very particular way of knowing what has happened or is happening. Being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition ... To be haunted in the name of a will to heal is to allow the ghost to help you imagine what was lost that never even existed, really. That is its utopian grace: to encourage a steely sorrow laced with delight for what we lost that we never had; to long

¹⁷ Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, 19.

¹⁸ Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, viii.

for the insight of that moment in which we recognize, as in Benjamin's profane illumination, that it could have been and can be otherwise.¹⁹

Having understood Gordon's methodological approach to engage with those who were disappeared by the society, I argue that we can apply her approach to facilitate the discussion of absence found in Bell's installation, simultaneously by creating an analogy with two performances staged in Vancouver which visually demonstrates such disappeared souls: Jamie Lee Hamilton's installation of stiletto-heeled shoes (1997) (Fig. 3) and Rebecca Belmore's performance piece, *Vigil* (2002) (Fig. 4). These two performances are akin to the memorial in many aspects in terms of presentation mode and social commentary.

The two performances comment on the disappearance of Indigenous peoples in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver. In 1997, Jamie Hamilton, a trans-woman of Metis and Cree heritage and an advocate of sex workers and LGBTQ2S, piled up sixty-seven pairs of heels on the front stairs of Vancouver City Hall. Through her installation, she drew attention to the lack of official police investigation into missing sex workers in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver, most of whom were Indigenous women.²⁰ Each pair of heels represented one of those missing woman, and Hamilton called for an ongoing commitment to preventing violence on bodies, especially on Indigenous bodies that have suffered under the established settler-colonial structure. Five years later, Rebecca Belmore, a multidisciplinary artist from the Lac Seul First Nation (Anishinaabe), staged a performance called *Vigil* at the corner of the Gore and Cordova Streets in the Downtown Eastside during the *Talking Stick Festival*. Commenting on the murders

¹⁹ Ibid., 8 & 57.

²⁰ AIDS Activist History, "Rest in Power, Jamie Lee Hamilton," AIDS Activist History Project, January 14, 2020, <https://aidsactivisthistory.ca/2020/01/14/rest-in-power-jamie-lee-hamilton/>; see also Carlito Pablo, "Vancouver Remembers Jamie Lee Hamilton, will Enshrine Legacy at Future Place," The Georgia Straight, August 20, 2020, <https://www.straight.com/news/vancouver-remembers-jamie-lee-hamilton-will-enshrine-legacy-at-future-place>.

of women from the Downtown Eastside by a serial killer Robert Pickton, her performance commemorated those missing and murdered women who had disappeared from the streets of Vancouver. Belmore began her performance by cleansing the space, scrubbing the street and lighting votive candles. Then, she proceeded to nail her red dress to a telephone pole, demonstrating a physical struggle to free herself from the pole by pulling the dress as hard as she could. Torn away from her body, her dress hung in tatters to signify the vulnerable lives of women on the streets. The performance concluded by yelling of the names of the missing women and stripping the blossoms and leaves off roses with her teeth. This final act proclaimed Belmore's strong determination to remember those who had been neglected by society.

Adopting Gordon's theorization in the study on Belmore's *Vigil*, Maggie Tate argues that the artist is "haunted by disappeared women."²¹ It is the artist who calls forth and embodies the ghost in her body through the ritualized performance. Here, Tate proposes that Belmore finds *her shape* through the sequence of her ritualized performance, which included cleansing the space with a pail of water and lighting candles and calling out the names of women on the streets. During the performance, Belmore's physical shape as a woman and herself being an Indigenous person imaginably overlaps with those missing and murdered women. Thus, the artist moves and acts like what those women had been. At the same time, she speaks to the public about the pain that they endured. Now, she becomes a mediator or medium of the women to re-engage and re-imagine the time when such a crime happened. Thus, *Her shape* reveals the history of invisibility and inequality imposed upon Indigenous communities, more specifically women, in Canada, as well as the spaces in which Indigenous peoples have been confined due to the

²¹ Maggie Tate, "Re-Presenting Invisibility: Ghostly Aesthetics in Rebecca Belmore's *Vigil* and *The Named and the Unnamed*," *Visual Studies (Abingdon, England)* 30, no. 1 (2015): 26.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1472586X.2015.996388>.

ceaseless residue of such history. Belmore then discovers *his hand* in the history of sexual violence inflicted on women, especially Indigenous women.²² Through Belmore's performance, the artist's individualized, corporeal haunted experience is conveyed to the viewers by visualizing *her shape* and *his hand*. From there, it elicits an affective response from those who observed the performance, forming a collective, communal experience and a profound recognition of the devastating consequences of settler-colonialism.²³

Returning to Bell's memorial, the presence of an active mediator similar to Belmore's role is nowhere to be found, but an object — shoes — substitutes for the position of Belmore. Given what was presented to the viewer regarding the undocumented death of Indigenous children at the residential schools, when contemplating the memorial, the viewer constructs imaginary figures of children standing in the shoes. This imaginary figuration of an individual child indicates that each pair of shoes is haunted by a ghostly presence of the child, and those ghosts of 215 children inhabit the space, filling the rows of the staircase with their invisible bodily mass. Finally, as Gordon says about the emergence of ghosts, "the disappeared make their presence known outside their own netherworld of darkened rooms, mournful moans, terrifying agony, and stolen moments of tenderness and solidarity with their fellow *Desaparecidos*."²⁴

While Belmore seeks *her shape* and *his hand* through the ritualized procedure of her enactment, it is the mode of display of those haunted kids' shoes that initiates the same search in Bell's memorial. In an organized manner, the pairs distance themselves about thirty centimeters, having their own personal space. What is intriguing to consider about such a mode of display is

²² Ibid., 30.

²³ Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 63-4.

²⁴ Ibid., 112. *Desaparecidos* is a term mostly used in South America as a person who has disappeared, presumed killed by members of the armed services or the police.

that our imaginary vision of the children begins with their bare feet. We conflate our vision with the material presence of shoes that we see in reality. If Hamilton's display of a hasty dumping of heels conjures an image of women running in a hurried and chaotic way to escape from coming sexual danger, Bell's display makes an appearance of the ghosts whose minimal garment for protecting the sole of their feet is missing, exposing their tender skin. The shoes envision *her shape* in the history of invisibility and inequality placed upon Indigenous peoples under the structure of colonialism, similar to Tate's interpretation of Belmore's performance. However, with that particular mode of installation, the search for *her shape* reveals the vulnerability of Indigenous children and the negligence to provide proper care and love to those young bodies. *His hand* is unveiled to the viewer when reconstructing the image of children by following the display of the shoes as well: the posture of standing children on the steps reminds the viewer of a traditional arrangement when taking a photograph in front of the school's front door for official records. Many photographs taken from residential schools portray children standing on the staircase, which we can easily find in a number of artworks and publications such as Robert Houle's *Sandy Bay* (1998-1999) (Fig. 5) and images from Carey Newman's book, *Picking up the Pieces* (Fig. 6).²⁵ Thus, this presentation mode of haunted shoes lets *his hand* appear to us: the history of government-enforced injustices, which abruptly separated children from their parents and took away the freedom and innocence that they deserved at their age of death.²⁶ The haunted

²⁵ In Robert Houle's *Sandy Bay* (1998-1999) which is currently exhibited at the Art Gallery of Ontario, "Robert Houle: Red is Beautiful," the artist includes a photograph that pictures a First Communion ceremony at which Robert's sister, Marilyn attended. & Carey Newman and Kirstie Hudson, *Picking up the Pieces: Residential School Memories and the Making of the Witness Blanket* (Victoria, British Columbia: Orca Book Publishers, 2019), 94.

²⁶ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *They Came for the Children: Canada, Aboriginal Peoples, and Residential Schools* (Winnipeg: Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2012), 36. Page 39 of the report it tells us the consequences of running away from the harsh treatment that the children received in the residential schools, "Harsh discipline prompted children to run away, often at great risk to themselves. The coroner investigating the deaths of four boys who ran away from the Lejac school in British Columbia in 1937 called for an end to the school's "excessive corporal punishment."

shoes through Gordon's theorization of haunting and ghostly matters, thus, illuminate the possibility of an absence of human figures to perform as a collective mass of bodies despite their invisibility as ghosts. Simultaneously, being haunted by the invisible presence through our own cognitive, imaginative process provides a rich understanding of what causes those invisible presences to be evoked and act up in pursuit of justice.

Monumentalization of Silence in a Silenced Place

To exorcise not in order to chase away the ghosts, but this time to grant them the right, if it means making them come back alive, as *revenants* who would no longer be *revenants*, but as other *arrivants* to whom a hospitable memory or promise must offer welcome ... Not in order to grant them the right in this sense but out of a concern for *justice* [italicized by the author].²⁷

————— Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx* (2006) —————

During Bell's artful protest against the history of colonial violence, the ghosts of lost children were summoned at a well-known location in Vancouver: the southern entrance of the Vancouver Art Gallery; the backside of the former Vancouver Law Courts building. Since its establishment in the fall of 1911 at the heart of Downtown Vancouver on West Georgia Street, the wide courtyard in front of the building has historically been considered a convenient gathering site not just for public events but also for protests and demonstrations.²⁸ As an early example, the Duke of Connaught who served as the Governor-General of Canada, and his wife were welcomed officially on September 18, 1912, at the courtyard where military and civic officials as well as boy scouts arranged themselves (Fig. 7).²⁹ Additionally, the steps leading from the courtyard to the front door of the old courthouse have historically been a favourite photogenic backdrop. For

²⁷ Jacques Derrida, Bernd Magnus, and Stephen Cullenberg, *Specters of Marx: the State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 175.

²⁸ "Former Vancouver Law Courts National Historic Site of Canada," Government of Canada, accessed April 13, 2021, https://www.pc.gc.ca/apps/dfhd/page_nhs_eng.aspx?id=85.

²⁹ Jim Fairley, *The Way We Were — The Story of the Old Vancouver Courthouse* (Vancouver: J. Fairley, 1986), A-26.

instance, a photograph taken on March 17, 1926, shows a gathering of the Military Institute with guests from the United States (Fig. 9).³⁰ At the time of writing this essay, the largest recent gathering at the courtyard has been a protest against anti-black racism and police brutality — the Black Lives Matter movement in response to the death of George Floyd by three Minneapolis Police officers who kneeled on his neck during his arrest in May 2020. Thousands of participants, with some news reports estimating around 3,500 people, convened at the courtyard for the protest on May 31, 2020 (Fig. 8).³¹ At the site, the first few stairs were occupied with protesters' banners and tents, being a platform for speakers to amplify their voices.³²

In contrast to the active occupancy of the courtyard and steps by the public from time to time, the place where the memorial has been assembled is a rather quiet space. No vehicles are allowed to pass, and the street is too narrow to have any significant gathering of people. Due to these spatial characteristics, the space has not been a preferred space for any major public events. However, the significance of the spatial intervention of the memorial can be interrogated with Gordon's theorization. In *Ghostly Matters*, Gordon delineates three characteristics of haunting as a way of understanding the intricate web of past and present social relations. The first characteristic, as she states, is that the activation of a ghost imports a "charged strangeness into the place or sphere it is haunting; thus, the haunting unsettles the propriety and property lines

³⁰ Fairley, *The Way We Were*, A-30.

³¹ Lindsay William-Ross, "Thousands of Peaceful Protesters Gather in Vancouver to Speak Out Against Racism," *Vancouver Is Awesome*, June 1, 2020, <https://www.vancouverisawesome.com/local-news/peaceful-protesters-vancouver-speak-out-against-racism-photos-2399715>. The majority of news articles about the BLM in Vancouver do not give any approximation of the number of participants. However, only this article by Lindsay William-Ross gives an estimation that cannot be fully credited as a legitimate source since the writer does not mention how she counted the number.

³² Brendan Kergin, "Here's Where and Why a 'Cancel Canada Day' Event is Happening in Vancouver," *Vancouver Is Awesome*, June 30, 2021, <https://www.vancouverisawesome.com/local-news/heres-where-and-why-a-cancel-canada-day-event-is-happening-in-vancouver-3921667>. & Katya Slepian, "Thousands Gather at Vancouver Art Gallery to Protest Racism," *Victoria News*, May 31, 2020, <https://www.vicnews.com/news/protesters-prepare-to-rally-against-racism-in-front-of-vancouver-art-gallery/>.

that delimit a zone of activity or knowledge.”³³ Thus, in Bell’s memorial, the ghosts of lost children evoked on the site disturb the silence of the place through the ghosts that come out from the haunted materials. Following Gordon, the intrusion of this silence into the place rearticulates the memorial’s position to stand for critical commentary on the former and current Canadian legal system since the location of the memorial makes an interesting spatial alignment with old and new Vancouver Law Courts: it is facing south where the current Vancouver Law Courts exist, and it stands against the old courthouse currently used as the Vancouver Art Gallery.

Through the ghosts of haunted shoes, the memorial unsettles “property and propriety that delimits a zone of activity or knowledge,” as quoted above. The Vancouver Art Gallery does not merely function as an art gallery anymore; by virtue of haunting, it is defaced as an embodiment of former Law Courts whose court decisions had governed the way of Indigenous peoples’ lives under systematic colonization, starting with the constraints of the Indian Act in 1876 and Canadian prime minister Sir John A Macdonald’s approval of new residential school in 1883.³⁴ Correspondingly, the current Vancouver Law Courts are not solely seen as government organizations dealing with contemporary legal issues. Now, it is clearer that the haunting continues to haunt the new courts, as they are held responsible for the decisions of former courts and the destruction that was carried out in the name of civilization under the legal order. The intervention into the Canadian jurisdiction through the memorial, which is considered linear progress, cannot be simply interpreted as a protest. It may be seen by some Indigenous peoples

³³ Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 63.

³⁴ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *They Came for the Children*, 6. A quotation by Sir John A Macdonald shows us his reason for establishing residential schools in Canada that resulted in the destruction of the Indigenous peoples’ lives: “Government and church officials often said the role of the residential school was to civilize and Christianize Aboriginal children. When put into practice, these noble-sounding ambitions translated into an assault on Aboriginal culture, language, spiritual beliefs, and practices. Residential schools were seen as preferable to on reserve day schools because they separated children from their parents, who were certain to oppose and resist such a radical cultural transformation.” (10)

as a call for reconciliation within the Canadian legal system, similar to what Chief Justice Lance Finch clearly expressed in his paper titled “The Duty to Learn: Taking Account of Indigenous Legal Orders in Practice,” at a conference on “Indigenous Legal Orders and the Common Law” in Vancouver, BC in 2012:

As part of this process, I suggest the current Canadian legal system must reconcile itself to coexistence with pre-existing Indigenous legal orders ... How can we make space within the legal landscape for Indigenous legal orders? The answer depends, at least in part, on an inversion of the question: a crucial part of this process must be to find space for ourselves, as strangers and newcomers, within the Indigenous legal orders themselves ... For non-Indigenous lawyers, judges, and students, this awareness is not restricted to recognizing simply that there is much we don't know. It is that we don't know how much we don't know.³⁵

After understanding the strategic placement of the memorial, it is crucial to note that the memorial is in the process of becoming a permanent structure on the site. In the cases of Hamilton and Belmore, their performances were archived as photographs and videos that are now available and accessible through online websites. Although both were held in a specific location for a certain period of time, they now exist in the past, as we can no longer witness their performances in person. In contrast, the memorial at the Vancouver Art Gallery still occupies the same site since May 2021 and is currently guarded by members of Indigenous community, even though public interest in colonial atrocities has faded away. Their efforts to preserve the

³⁵ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Canada's Residential Schools. Volume 6: Reconciliation: the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada* (Montreal: Published for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada by McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015), 77.

memorial can be seen as a desire to construct a new monument, following Alois Riegl's ideas in his essay, "The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Origin" (1903). In this essay, Riegl identifies a set of past and present values that often conflict with one another and are registered in different ways throughout history when the preservation of the monument comes into an issue.³⁶ Rather than analyzing why we should preserve the memorial according to certain values, what needs to be taken into consideration is Riegl's very reason for conserving monuments which is to preserve memory. Thus, the desire "to fix or monumentalize the moment of an event based on a belief of which certain moment is irreplaceable and should be immortalized" is at the core of the creation of monuments, according to Riegl's point of view.³⁷ With Riegl's notion of permanence of monument, Gordon's other two characteristics of the ghost help explain the contribution of haunted matter to the monumentalization of the memorial:

The ghost is primarily a symptom of what is missing. It gives notice not only to itself but also to what it represents ... From a certain vantage point, the ghost also simultaneously represents a future possibility, a hope. Finally, I have suggested that the ghost is alive. We are in relation to it, and it has designs on us such that we must reckon with it graciously, attempting to offer it a hospitable memory *out of a concern for justice* [italicized by the author]. Out of a concern for justice would be the only reason one would bother.³⁸

The monumentalization of *her shape* and *his hand*, which is represented through the display of children's shoes, declares the solidarity of Indigenous peoples in remembering the children

³⁶ Alois Riegl, "The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Origin," in *Historical and Philosophical Issues in the Conservation of Cultural Heritage*, edited by Nicholas Stanley Price, M. Kirby Talley, Jr., Alessandra Melucco Vaccaro (Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute, 1996), 69-72.

³⁷ Mike Gubset, *Time's Visible Surface: Alois Riegl and the Discourse on History and Temporality in Fin-de-Siecle Vienna* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2006), 148-9.

³⁸ Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 36-7.

whose deaths were erased from Canadian history. By monumentalizing the moment of discovery of their unmarked graves, the placement of the memorial in between the past and present Vancouver courthouses strengthens the Indigenous community's attempt to turn the memorial into a monument. Through their efforts, the Indigenous community hopes to remember the tragedy by interfering with the official government structure in order to ensure that the children's story is not forgotten. Thus, it offers the lost children 'a hospitable memory out of a concern for justice' and teaches Canadians the correct history and the suffering endured by victims and survivors of colonial atrocities. The Truth and Reconciliation Report also reflects this sentiment, stating: "History plays an important role in reconciliation; to build for the future, Canadians must look to, and learn from, the past."³⁹

Soon after news of the unmarked graves was circulated, several Catholic churches in British Columbia and Alberta were vandalized. Subsequently, statues symbolizing the British Empire were toppled down on Canada Day in 2021 in revenge for the miserable fate of the children.⁴⁰ In Winnipeg, statues of Queens Elizabeth II and Victoria in front of the Manitoba Legislature were destroyed while protesters chanted, "no pride in genocide."⁴¹ In Victoria, BC, protesters took down a statue of Captain James Cook, which stood in front of the Empress Hotel, and threw it into the inner harbour (Fig. 10).⁴² In the demise of symbols of colonization across the country, the memorial initially installed by Tamara Bell stood silently at the back of the Vancouver Art Gallery. Here, though silently, an activist movement is also engaged by the

³⁹ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Canada's Residential Schools*, 4.

⁴⁰ Cameron French, "Church Vandalism, Toppled Statues on Canada Day of Celebration and Protest," *CTV News*, July 2, 2021, <https://www.ctvnews.ca/canada/church-vandalism-toppled-statues-on-a-canada-day-of-celebration-and-protest-1.5494294>.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² "Victoria Statue of Captain Cook Pulled Down, Thrown into Harbour," *CTV News*, July 2, 2021, <https://vancouverisland.ctvnews.ca/victoria-statue-of-captain-cook-pulled-down-thrown-into-harbour-1.5494067>.

people who are invisible to us. At the memorial, shoes, some of which are worn out, are displayed with each pair representing one of the 215 children whose graves were not even properly prepared at the end of their lives. Bewildered by the history of colonization, they return to us through the shoes. While their transparent bodies fill the rows of steps with their bare feet, we look for *their shapes* and *his/her hands* to not let them disappear again. We stand in front of them and their shoes, navigating the history of systematic colonial violence found in the residential schools that have wounded the delicate and unprotected bodies of young children without love and care. Then, we began to realize that their presence starts to unsettle the space beneath the memorial. Unrestricting the zone of activity, the children pose a question on the legal responsibility of the Canadian legal system on this matter by their ongoing occupation of the site marked as a spatial intermediary between the former and current Vancouver Law Courthouses. By fixing the moment of discovery of their fragmented bones permanently at the site, the ghosts of children are remembered and will be continuously remembered at the southern entrance of the Vancouver Art Gallery, in the hope of presenting a welcoming memory.

Bibliography

- AIDS Activist History. "Rest in Power, Jamie Lee Hamilton." AIDS Activist History Project, January 14, 2020. <https://aidsactivisthistory.ca/2020/01/14/rest-in-power-jamie-lee-hamilton/>.
- CBC News. "Makeshift Residential School Memorial at Vancouver Art Gallery has been Removed" May 19, 2023, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/makeshift-residential-school-memorial-at-vag-removed-1.6849653>.
- CTV News. "Kahnawake Residents Create Memorial for 215 Children Found Buried at B.C. Residential School" May 30, 2021. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/kahnawake-residents-create-memorial-for-215-children-1.6046193>.
- . "Parliament Hill Memorial to Residential School Children Taken Down." October 22, 2021. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/shoe-memorial-residential-school-victims-parliament-hill-ottawa-1.6221556>.
- . "Victoria Statue of Captain Cook Pulled Down, Thrown into Harbour." July 2, 2021. <https://vancouverisland.ctvnews.ca/victoria-statue-of-captain-cook-pulled-down-thrown-into-harbour-1.5494067>.
- Daly, Amanda May. "UK Vigil for #215children & victims/survivors/families." Facebook, June 6, 2021. https://www.facebook.com/events/970065480429846/?acontext=%7B%22ref%22%3A%2252%22%2C%22action_history%22%3A%22%7B%5C%22surface%5C%22%3A%5C%22share_link%5C%22%2C%5C%22mechanism%5C%22%3A%5C%22share_link%5C%22%2C%5C%22extra_data%5C%22%3A%7B%5C%22invite_link_id%5C%22%3A616376173089625%7D%7D%7D%22%7D.
- Davis, Wynne. "The Remains of 215 Indigenous Children Have Been Found at a Former School in Canada." *The NPR*, May 29, 2021. <https://www.npr.org/2021/05/29/1001566509/the-remains-of-215-indigenous-children-have-been-found-at-a-former-school-in-can>.
- Dhillon, Jaskiran. "Notes on Becoming a Comrade: Indigenous Women, Leadership, and Movement(s) for Decolonization." *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 43, no. 3 (2019): 41–54.
- Dellplain, Maddi and Jen St. Denis. "In Their Shoes: Community Creates a Symbol of Mourning for Those Killed in Residential Schools." *The Tyee*, June 2, 2021. <https://thetyee.ca/News/2021/06/02/Shoes-Activists-Create-Symbol-of-Mourning-Residential-Schools/>.

Derrida, Jacques, Bernd Magnus, and Stephen Cullenberg. *Specters of Marx: the State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*. New York: Routledge, 2006.

Fairley, Jim. *The Way We Were — The Story of the Old Vancouver Courthouse*. Vancouver: J. Fairley, 1986.

French, Cameron. “Church Vandalism, Toppled Statues on Canada Day of Celebration and Protest.” *CTV News*, July 2, 2021.
<https://www.ctvnews.ca/canada/church-vandalism-toppled-statues-on-a-canada-day-of-celebration-and-protest-1.5494294>.

Gordon, Avery F. *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

Government of Canada. “Former Vancouver Law Courts National Historic Site of Canada.” Accessed April 13, 2021.
https://www.pc.gc.ca/apps/dfhd/page_nhs_eng.aspx?id=85.

Gubser, Mike. *Time’s Visible Surface: Alois Riegl and the Discourse on History and Temporality in Fin-de-Siecle Vienna*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2006.

Kergin, Brendan. “Here’s Where and Why a ‘Cancel Canada Day’ Event is Happening in Vancouver.” *Vancouver Is Awesome*, June 30, 2021.
<https://www.vancouverisawesome.com/local-news/heres-where-and-why-a-cancel-canada-day-event-is-happening-in-vancouver-3921667>.

Lee, Michael. “Where Searches for Remains are Happening at Former Residential School Sites.” *CTV News*, January 25, 2022.
<https://www.ctvnews.ca/canada/where-searches-for-remains-are-happening-at-former-residential-school-sites-1.5754222>.

Merriam-Webster. “Activism.” Accessed April 14, 2022.
<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/activism?src=search-dict-box>.

Newman, Carey, and Kirstie Hudson. *Picking up the Pieces: Residential School Memories and the Making of the Witness Blanket*. Victoria, British Columbia: Orca Book Publishers, 2019.

Oxford English Dictionary. “Activism.” Accessed April 14, 2022.
<https://www-oed-com.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/view/Entry/1957?redirectedFrom=activism#eid>.

Reed, T. V. *The Art of Protest: Culture and Activism from the Civil Rights Movement to the Present*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019.
<https://doi.org/10.5749/j.ctvb1hrf>.

- Riegl, Alois. "The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Origin," in *Historical and Philosophical Issues in the Conservation of Cultural Heritage*, edited by Nicholas Stanley Price, M. Kirby Talley, Jr., Alessandra Melucco Vaccaro, 69-83. Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute, 1996.
- Risom, Lisa. "Prince Albert Memorial Honours 215 Children whose Remains were Found on Site of Former BC Residential School." *CTV News*, May 31, 2021. https://saskatoon.ctvnews.ca/prince-albert-memorial-honours-215-children-whose-remains-were-found-on-site-of-former-bc-residential-school-1.5450306?cid=sm%3Atrueanthe%3Actvsaskatoon%3Apost&utm_campaign=trueAnthem%3A%20Trending%20Content&utm_medium=trueAnthem&utm_source=facebook&fbclid=IwAR2dC5I9isDoGwNB3ovRCW5KwjlbJY1APdDo9u8AxhHeNZTvC2HEqXL F3tA.
- Skjerven, Kelly. "Estimated 751 Unmarked Graves Found at Former Saskatchewan Residential School." *Global News*, June 24, 2021. <https://globalnews.ca/news/7977208/marieval-residential-school-unmarked-graves-2/>.
- Slepian, Katya. "Thousands Gather at Vancouver Art Gallery to Protest Racism." *Victoria News*, May 31, 2020. <https://www.vicnews.com/news/protesters-prepare-to-rally-against-racism-in-front-of-vancouver-art-gallery/>.
- Stacey, Lisa. "'To Not Let Them be Forgotten': Vancouver Memorial Created after 215 Children's Remains Found in Kamloops." *CityNews: Everywhere*, May 28, 2021. <https://vancouver.citynews.ca/2021/05/28/vancouver-memorial-kamloops-children-residential-school/>.
- Tate, Maggie. "Re-Presenting Invisibility: Ghostly Aesthetics in Rebecca Belmore's Vigil and The Named and the Unnamed." *Visual Studies (Abingdon, England)* 30, no. 1 (2015): 20–31. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1472586X.2015.996388>.
- Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. *They Came for the Children: Canada, Aboriginal Peoples, and Residential Schools*. Winnipeg: Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2012.
- . *Canada's Residential Schools. Volume 6: Reconciliation: the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*. Montreal: Published for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada by McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015.
- Tuck, Eve and K. Wayne Yang. "Unbecoming Claims: Pedagogies of Refusal in Qualitative Research." *Qualitative Inquiry* 20, 6 (2014): 811–818.
- Wells, Nick. "Churches' Refusal to Release Records Hinders Identification of Buried Children." *Canada's National Observer*, June 3, 2021.

<https://www.nationalobserver.com/2021/06/03/news/church-Catholic-refusal-release-records-hinder-identification-buried-children-Turpel-Lafond>.

Williams, Patricia J. *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: Harvard University Press, 1991.

William-Ross, Lindsay. “Thousands of Peaceful Protesters Gather in Vancouver to Speak Out Against Racism.” *Vancouver Is Awesome*, June 1, 2020.

<https://www.vancouverisawesome.com/local-news/peaceful-protesters-vancouver-speak-out-against-racism-photos-2399715>.

List of Illustrations

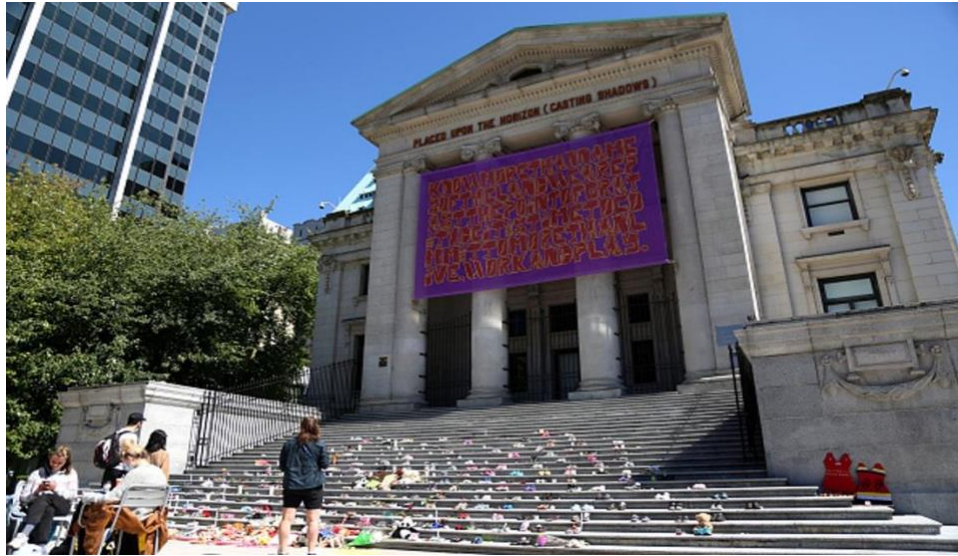


Fig. 1: The memorial set up at the southern entrance of Vancouver Art Gallery by Tamara Bell, 2021, Children's shoes, Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, B.C., photo by Mert Alper Dervis/Anadolu Agency

<https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2021/06/04/haida-artist-tamara-bell-installs-215-shoes-on-the-steps-of-vancouver-art-gallery-as-a-memorial-to-indigenous-children-who-died-at-residential-school>



Fig. 2: The memorial placed around the Centennial Flame, 2021, Shoes, stuffed toys and other items, Parliament Hill, Ottawa, Ontario, photo by Brian Morris

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/shoe-memorial-residential-school-victims-parliament-hill-ottawa-1.6221556>



Fig. 3: Jamie Lee Hamilton and her installation of 67 pairs of shoes on the steps of City Hall, 1997, stiletto-heeled shoes, Vancouver, B.C.,
<<https://www.straight.com/news/vancouver-remembers-jamie-lee-hamilton-will-enshrine-legacy-at-future-place>>



Fig. 4: Rebecca Belmore, an excerpt from the *Vigil*, 2002, performance, Vancouver, B.C.,
Rebecca Belmore's website,
<<https://www.rebeccabelmore.com/vigil/>>



Fig. 5: Robert Houle, *Sandy Bay*, 1998-99, oil, black-and-white photograph, colour photograph on canvas, and Masonite, Art Gallery of Ontario, Ontario, photo by the author.



Fig. 6: One of the group photos taken from the residential school. (Newman and Hudson, *Picking Up the Pieces*, p. 94).



Fig. 7: The Reception Party for the Governor-General of Canada at the courtyard of the law building, 1912, photograph, Vancouver, B.C. (Fairley, *The Way We Were*, A-26).



Fig. 8: The Black Lives Matter Movement in front of the Vancouver Art Gallery, May 31, 2020, video, Vancouver, B.C., twitter by Marguerite Ethier.

<https://www.vicnews.com/news/protectors-prepare-to-rally-against-racism-in-front-of-vancouver-art-gallery/>



Fig. 9: The Military Institute with guests from the United States at the courthouse steps, 1926, photograph, Vancouver, B.C. (Fairley, *The Way We Were*, A-30).



Fig. 10: The statue of Capt. James Cook being drown in the harbour of Victoria, B.C., July 2, 2021, photograph, Victoria, B.C., twitter by Climate Justice Victoria.

<https://twitter.com/CJusticeVic/status/1410808100127338497?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1410808100127338497%7Ctwgr%5E%7Ctwcon%5Es1_&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fvancouverisland.ctvnews.ca%2Fvictoria-statue-of-captain-cook-pulled-down-thrown-into-harbour-1.5494067>