

Artistic Reconnection

On June 22, 2021, Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland announced a federal initiative to recognize the effects of the Federal Indian boarding school system. Secretary Haaland aimed for the initiative to recover the identities of Indigenous children forced into these schools and to locate their burial sites. The first school in this network was the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, opened in 1879 on a former military barracks that is now the campus of the U.S. Army War College. More than ten thousand Indigenous children from over 140 Indigenous communities were forced to attend until the school's closing in 1918. One of over 408 institutions in the U.S., the Carlisle School was founded with the now infamous philosophy of "kill the Indian, save the man." Students underwent the seizure of personal belongings with cultural significance and were forced to wear military-style uniforms. Native languages were forbidden, and students' hair was cut upon arrival to fit Anglo standards, a particularly heinous act due to the cultural and emotional significance of a person's hair for many native cultures. The systematic efforts perpetrated against Indigenous people across the continent was intended to separate them from their sense of identity. Despite the fact that the Carlisle Indian Industrial School closed over a century ago, the trauma and erasure it caused have affected generations.

The history taught in schools and in museums rarely displays authentic narratives of Indigenous people and the pain they have endured. Today, Indigenous communities throughout North America are utilizing art to recover from cultural oppression and the generational trauma they experienced. Art has the unique ability to display an artist's perspective in an accessible way, challenging false narratives directly via personal experience. Further, storytelling is a vital aspect of many Indigenous cultures, passing on cultural practices and important shared knowledge. Indigenous storytelling practices often rely on oral histories, making it that much more important that stories are passed down to younger generations.

The network of boarding schools robbed generations of their ability to participate in their own cultures and histories, thus the Carlisle Project is one of the many ways that Indigenous people are working to reclaim and reconnect with their culture. Fighting the erasure of harmful colonialist policies, Indigenous people across the U.S. and Canada have produced art that shows their stories on their own terms. To name only a few examples, the work of numerous Indigenous artists have created installments around Canadian universities, such as at York University and the University of Alberta. Kent Monkman is another notable artist creating authentic representation of colonialist oppression towards Indigenous communities.

By Noah Salsich '25, Clarke Forum Student Project Manager

"Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative Investigative Report," Department of the Interior (https://www.bia.gov/sites/default/files/dup/inline-files/bsi_investigative_report_may_2022_508.pdf); "The Carlisle Project," New Musicals Lab (<https://www.newmusicals.com/thecarlisleproject>); "Storytelling is Vital to Many Indigenous Cultures," Utah Public Radio (<https://www.upr.org/utah-news/2021-10-29/storytelling-is-vital-to-many-indigenous-cultures-but-preserving-oral-traditions-can-be-challenging>); "Storytelling," First Nation Pedagogy (<https://firstnationspedagogy.ca/storytelling.html>); "The Art of Reconciliation," Canadian University Affairs (<https://www.universityaffairs.ca/features/feature-article/the-art-of-reconciliation>); "Carlisle by the Numbers," Carlisle Indian School Project (<https://carlisleindianschoolproject.com>); "How art can help with Indigenous reconciliation," University of British Columbia (<https://beyond.ubc.ca/kent-monkman-exhibition>)