



Faculty of Liberal Arts & Sciences

2016

Routing Towards Reconciliation: A review of Hill L'Hirondelle, Gabrielle and Sophie McCall. 2015. *The Land We Are: Artists and Writers Unsettle the Politics of Reconciliation*. Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring Publishing.

Morrisette, Suzanne

Suggested citation:

Morrisette, Suzanne (2016) Routing Towards Reconciliation: A review of Hill L'Hirondelle, Gabrielle and Sophie McCall. 2015. *The Land We Are: Artists and Writers Unsettle the Politics of Reconciliation*. Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring Publishing. TOPIA: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies, 36. pp. 191-195. Available at <http://openresearch.ocadu.ca/id/eprint/2384/>

Open Research is a publicly accessible, curated repository for the preservation and dissemination of scholarly and creative output of the OCAD University community. Material in Open Research is open access and made available via the consent of the author and/or rights holder on a non-exclusive basis.

The OCAD University Library is committed to accessibility as outlined in the [Ontario Human Rights Code](#) and the [Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act \(AODA\)](#) and is working to improve accessibility of the Open Research Repository collection. If you require an accessible version of a repository item contact us at repository@ocadu.ca.

Suzanne Morrisette

Routing Towards Reconciliation

A review of

Hill L'Hirondelle, Gabrielle and Sophie McCall. 2015. *The Land We Are: Artists and Writers Unsettle the Politics of Reconciliation*. Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring Publishing.

The publication of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's final report in 2015 has likely provided many Canadians with a common framework for understanding the concept of reconciliation today. Moving forward in a renewed relationship, it may seem paradoxical, then, to witness the ongoing discontinuities in values and understandings that exist between Indigenous people and settler governments. Such discontinuities continue to provoke challenging tensions around the roles and responsibilities between all people within the land that we now share. *The Land We Are* looks to these moments of discord as the impetus for questioning our collective next move while using art as the vehicle through which to mobilize ideas that can positively change the relationship between Indigenous and settler communities as we move into the future. With empathy and incisive awareness, co-editors Gabrielle Hill L'Hirondelle and Sophie McCall draw upon the collaborative contributions of Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists, academics and artist-academics in order to carve out a space in which to contest the idea that reconciliation necessarily represents an appropriate and complete method for addressing injustice.

To underscore the problems inherent within this idea, co-editors Hill L'Hirondelle and McCall draw from the work of scholars who take up the ways in which reconciliation might present problems for Indigenous people when used as a framework for coexistence. They draw upon the work of Yellowknives Dene scholar Glen

Coulthard, and in particular, his description of the politics of recognition as “the now expansive range of recognition-based models of liberal pluralism that seek to ‘reconcile’ Indigenous assertions of nationhood with settler state sovereignty via the accommodation of Indigenous identity claims in some form of renewed legal and political relationship with the Canadian state” (Coulthard 2014: 3). By contextualizing the discourse of reconciliation with this scholarship, Hill L’Hirondelle and McCall highlight the ways that a suspicion of state strategies for recognition offers a useful vantage point from which to view some of reconciliation’s similarly compromising qualities: In either case, both the recognized and the reconciled become accepted, included, and considered whole human beings while the root of the problem remains intact, though newly guised.

Contributors Dylan Robinson and Karen Zaiontz explore the ways in which this kind of liberal inclusion plays out within public art programming, and the impact that this method of redress has upon Indigenous visual culture and history. In their essay, “Public Art in Vancouver and the Civic Infrastructure of Redress,” Robinson and Zaiontz describe several recent public art projects in Vancouver that they argue are either successful or not based upon the projects’ ability to expose the increasingly naturalized alliance between liberal inclusion and reconciliation. They ask important questions about the depth and integrity of the intentions that guide organizers in their calls for public art projects, as well as the possible desires guiding their specific inclusion of Indigenous artists. By identifying this hallmark gesture of liberal multicultural inclusion, these authors expose the potential for artistic opportunities to undercut Indigenous political knowledge by co-opting Indigenous visual culture into the identity of the nation-state.

Many Indigenous and otherwise racialized artists are likely familiar with this kind of risk. In their essay “unreconciling public art,” the New BC Indian Art and Welfare Society Collective express their ambivalence toward accepting a commission in the city of Vancouver during the 2014 “Year of Reconciliation,” a marker of time that may rest upon the assumptions that divisions and disagreements can be smoothed over and that past harms can be forgotten. Because they are artists themselves, their reflections provide significant insight into the ways in which opportunities, and by extension funding priorities, for public art may inadvertently channel artistic activities, and their reception, according to particular systems of value and knowledge. At the same time, these artists also describe how they resisted these systems when they took charge of the project with their own guiding intention to assert Indigenous presence in public spaces where that presence was previously underrepresented. With this text, members of the New BC Indian Art and Welfare Society Collective provide an example of the ways in which other artists might navigate recognition’s inclusionary logics in order to deploy ideas on their own terms.

Many of the contributing authors in this anthology express an awareness of the stakes at hand when working to reconfigure accepted knowledge of reconciliation and identity. For example, Allison Hargreaves and David Jefferess’s compelling essay “Always Beginning: Imagining Reconciliation Beyond Inclusion or Loss” calls out the possibility for the discourses of reconciliation to be deployed as an absolution of “non-Indigenous guilt and responsibility” (201). True reconciliation, they suggest, implies a more laborious task for settlers, one which demands the difficult work of reconceptualizing relationships to each other and to the land. Their essay asks readers to consider how sites of tension, such as blockades or barriers, could be conceptually transformed and viewed instead as passageways leading from one understanding to another. Hargreaves and Jefferess’s framing of blockades and political demonstrations as passageways provides a useful way of considering how spaces—both literal and figurative—can form productive sites from which to set new foundations for understanding past harms and for envisioning future relationships based on health, happiness and mutual respect. In this sense, a blockade operates in much the same way as a paradigm shift. This parallel is useful for understanding the difficulty of the work ahead.

Other authors in this anthology posit that there is space for us to consider such shifts as transformative rather than as disruptive or antagonistic. For example, David Garneau and Clement Yeh’s text “Apology Dice: Collaboration in Progress” challenges understandings of reconciliation that burden residential school survivors, and not their perpetrators, with the task of working through trauma in order to move forward in mutual forgiveness (75). Garneau and Yeh provide a description of *Apology Dice*, a collaborative game/artwork aimed at facilitating empathetic dialogue about the different people and ideas at stake in reconciliation-based dialogue. By rolling three wooden dice, participants form three-word sentences that are then used to guide discussion around apology. The work disrupts the idea that an apology paves a clean and clear path towards a renewed relationship, and invites participants to labour together in unpacking and negotiating the terms of their ongoing relationship.

The topic of apology and redress reappears in many different ways throughout the anthology. Layli Long Soldier’s poem “Whereas,” for instance, reflects on apology in the context of the United States, where President Obama signed the Congressional Resolution of Apology to Native Americans in 2009. Through her poignant recollections of experiences that she has had with her daughter, she asks: What kinds of hurt have Indigenous people have repressed, and what has actually changed as a result of this apology? Another creative reflection upon the question of apology can be found in Leah Decter and Jaimie Isaac’s essay “Reflections on Unsettling Narratives of Denial,” which describes their durational sewing action piece, *official denial: trade value in progress*. Their discussion centres upon the problematic and hypocritical nature of then-Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s 2008 apology for the Canadian government’s role in implementing and enforcing the residential school

system and his later comments at the G20 Summit, which arguably renounced the original apology. The artwork is formed by participants who have together embroidered their own text-based reflections and responses on several large Hudson's Bay Company blankets that have been sewn together. Through their work, Decter and Isaac promote engagement as a practice for growing just relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.

Following in this vein, Leah Decter and Ayumi Goto's text, "Call and Response," brings together artworks from each artist's respective practice to engage in dialogue about creating just futures for Indigenous-settler relationships as understood from the two artists' perspectives, one settler and one immigrant. Another contribution by Ayumi Goto, this time with Peter Morin, entitled "Hair," describes a performance of the same name in which both Goto and Morin undertake laborious and sacrificial actions that demonstrate the impacts of residential schools, while taking on some of that pain as artists, one Indigenous and one immigrant, in the service of writing a "new canada" (184). In this sense the artworks described in the text call upon all Canadians to examine their own relationship to colonial histories and continued responsibility to establish and maintain just relations.

Throughout the anthology, scholars and artists work together to craft collaborative responses that build understandings between different forms of practice, knowledge and experience. In most cases, these co-constructed narratives serve to illustrate the relational nature of artistic and scholarly practice, providing examples of the ways in which discourse within a given field of study is shaped by interactions between people and ideas over time. In this sense, Jordan Abel's contribution stands apart from the other texts for its different take on collaboration. Beginning with the text from Stephen Harper's apology for the institution and legacies of residential schools, Abel then reorders words and sentences in ways that distort and contort Harper's stated intentions to the point where the text then begins to allude to other, possibly more genuine (albeit more sinister) intentions. In many ways Abel's gesture could be considered as simply an appropriation and reconceptualization of a pre-existing text. However, it seems valuable to consider the ways in which Abel's text, "Please check against delivery," allows readers to consider other types of collaboration that not only include, but also force the involvement of, our politicians and policy-makers in critical discussions about culpability and reconciliation.

Other collaborations between contributors highlight more intimate and personal reflections, such as Skeena Reece and Sandra Semchuck's shared e-mail correspondence leading up to and following their creation of a video work that focuses on an exploration of the intergenerational effects of residential schools. Similarly, Jonathan Dewar's interview with artist Adrian Stimson approaches the subject of reconciliation through the telling of individual experience and first-hand knowledge. These contributions, as well as Dewar's essay on hosting the Walking With Our Sisters ceremony at the Shingwauk Residential Schools Centre at Algoma

University in 2014, stand out in the anthology as representing personal reflections on reconciliation, and the individual and collective labour involved in these processes.

As the setting upon which the renewed relationship between Indigenous people and settler governments will take place, land is central to the discussion of reconciliation. Although less apparent within the essays themselves, the land remains central throughout the volume, as it is where dissenting positions are located that point to the inequity and injustice of the settler government's current relationships with Indigenous peoples. *The Land We Are* opens up important and timely dialogue at the intersection of art and reconciliation, successfully disrupting expectations that the logics of reconciliation necessarily always operate in the service of Indigenous peoples. Through their analysis and selection of texts, co-editors Hill L'Hirondelle and McCall have created a productive avenue of discourse, while sowing the seeds for future research on the role of art in navigating political discussions for coexistence in these times of reconciliation.

References

Hill L'Hirondelle, Gabrielle and Sophie McCall, eds. 2015. In *The Land We Are: Artists and Writers Unsettle the Politics of Reconciliation*. Arbeiter Ring Publishing.

Coulthard, Glen S. 2014. *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.