



Book Review

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Review Essay: Michael Asch, John Borrows, and James Tully. 2018. *Resurgence and Reconciliation: Indigenous-Settler Relations and Earth Teachings.*

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Between 2012 and 2014—as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was gathering testimonies alongside research into the history and legacy of the Residential Schools system—Michael Asch, John Borrows, and James Tully delivered lectures at Dalhousie University on the traditional territory of the Mi'kmaq peoples. These lectures on reconciliation, responsibility, and shared futures became the opening essays of the volume under review. In September 2015—between the release of the TRC's interim report in May and the final report in December, as well as a federal election that saw the Justin Trudeau led Liberals return to power partly on the claim to implement reconciliation—Asch, Borrows, and Tully organized another dialogue across the country on Coast Salish territory in Victoria, British Columbia. The remainder of the volume—eight essays by Aaron Mills, Gina Starblanket and Heidi Kiiwetinepinesiik Stark, Paulette Regan, Regna Darnell, Kiera Ladner, Nancy J. Turner and Pamela Spalding, Kent McNeil, and Brian Noble—include some of the responses to Asch, Borrows, and Tully's initial provocations. The collection as a whole will certainly be of note to anyone studying the politics of reconciliation in Canada today.

Given spatial limitations and the desire to say something about the volume rather than summarize the volume's content, my focus here is necessarily limited. Unfortunately then—and apologies too—I spend less time on Regan's important 'insider' account of the TRC which makes the case for how the TRC pushed against the limits of alternative state-led TRC processes; Darnell's account of the potential and limits of interdisciplinary, international, and interinstitutional research projects; Ladner's discussion of the limits of, yet hope in a transformative form of reconciliation; Turner and Spalding's account of the ethnoecology of colonization and its potential role in decolonization; McNeil's distinction between *de jure* versus *de facto* sovereignty that highlights the importance of the question of 'which law' for adjudicating questions of legitimacy and legality; and Noble's reflections on the opening essays in terms of what he refers to as 'treaty ecologies' and whose account of coloniality draws out the 'negative' moment implicit in these opening essays. Instead, I highlight the main insights of the leading essays by Asch, Borrows, and Tully, paying particular attention to the distinct formulations of the problem of reconciliation and their respective answers. Following this, I summarize the contributions of Aaron Mills alongside Gina Starblanket and Heidi Stark, connecting their arguments to those of the initial essays.

Asch's contribution to the volume is a succinct reformulation of the position advanced in his 2014 award-winning text, *On Being Here to Stay* (2014). For Asch, the problem of reconciliation is that non-Indigenous peoples, convinced of the need to take responsibility

for colonization, are unsure how to proceed given the gap between our ideals and practices (33). His answer to this problem involves the recovery of a settler treaty tradition in order to disclose a moment in which shared understanding was reached between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples on treaty as “a partnership based on mutual sharing” (34). The upshot of this is that advocacy for a treaty relationship is then seen to be an *extension* of our principles: “our practices come into line with our values” (44).

In “Earth-Bound: Indigenous Resurgence and Environmental Reconciliation,” John Borrows lays out the conditions of reconciliation: “Reconciliation between Indigenous peoples and the Crown *requires* our collective reconciliation with the earth” (49). Unlike Asch, here we see Borrows attend to the particular understandings of treaty and Indigenous law more generally rather than invoking a moment of shared understanding. Yet Borrows still insists on the relevance and importance of these particular understandings to *all* newcomers, especially amidst ecological crises. For Borrows, Anishinaabe language and law is an important part of the answer to this formulation of the problem of reconciliation because they are “oriented to conjoining and organizing stable yet dynamic states of being in their ever-shifting processes” while “[a] language of animacy builds on the insight that the world is alive and has an agency of its own” (52).

Tully’s “Reconciliation Here on Earth” argues that reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples and between human beings and the living earth *must proceed together*. This is so given their shared origins (103), interrelations (84, 108), and the role of Indigenous ecological knowledge in facilitating non-Indigenous people’s reconciliation with the earth (83-5). Tully further argues that this form of reconciliation is *now* possible because of an epistemic “convergence” between Indigenous knowledges and life and earth system sciences on “our interdependent relationships within and with [the living earth]”, alongside the recognition of equality and interdependency between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples as observed in the equality of Indigenous and Western knowledges as well *as* the recognition of the rights of Indigenous peoples to self-determination (85). For Tully, this “can provide the common ground for a profound, transformative reconciliation with each other and the living earth” (*ibid.*).

If the problem of reconciliation for Asch is how the gap between Canadian ideals and its colonial practices prevents a response by non-Indigenous peoples, and for Borrows, the necessity of a double reconciliation, for Tully the problem of reconciliation is also conceptual, hence, his explication of the concept of “transformative reconciliation”. To do so, he begins by contrasting two competing definitions of reconciliation: ‘reconciliation-with’ expressed by the German word *versohnung* and ‘reconciliation-to’ or *vertagen*. His point of introducing these two different concepts is to draw attention to the limits of the latter and the necessity of the former *in response to* critiques of reconciliation that mistake reconciliation-to as the exhaustive meaning of reconciliation, excluding the transformative understanding of reconciliation-with. The problem is not the idea but rather the conception of reconciliation at play. For Tully, transformative reconciliation is a prefigurative “mode of ethical practice with others here and now” with the “aim” of “work[ing] together to

transform unsustainable relationships into conciliatory and sustainable ones” (92-3). These features map onto a three phase “meta-cycle of life” that can be glossed as conciliation, irreconciliation, and reconciliation (94-5). This third phase is not a return but a sublation as participants have gone through a “learning cycle” which discloses the conditions and practices of sustainable co-existence, making them “more precautionary and better prepared to respond to and cope with the next outbreak of aggressive and unsustainable interaction” (95). Furthermore, “they also know each other better”; “they become friends who have suffered and overcome enormous challenges together” (ibid.). Ultimately, “they have overcome alienation and are at home with each other and the living earth” (ibid.).

In his contribution to the volume, Mills picks up on the debate between “resurgent and reconciliatory paradigms of decolonization” that frame the volume’s introduction, specifically as it pertains to questions of political action and the relationship between identity and decolonization (137). The purpose of Mill’s contribution is to suggest a third view: rootedness. The idea here is that ‘rootedness’ sets limits—“reconcile our life way (and the constitutional order it gives rise to) with the earth way” (see also 159) —while celebrating difference as a “disclosure of the earth way” (156). This is a vision of “non-disconnection” rather than either “non-conflict” or separation and independence (ibid.).

In terms of political action, resurgence prescribes action “outside of the formal mechanisms that liberal constitutionalism provides”, while reconciliation prescribes “reformation from within the given (liberal) structures and institutions” (137). Resurgence argues that these forums “allow for contestation within, but never over the colonial state’s imposed liberal constitutional order, and thus its structural commitment to violence against Indigenous peoples, lands, and lifeways” (137). Reconciliation argues against the practicality and responsibility of this prescription. Mills, however, challenges the reconciliation paradigm’s conceptualization of the problem of colonialism as one of “sustained omission and exclusion” with the corresponding ‘cure’ of reform and inclusion, where some within this paradigm suggest that reform leads to transformation—what might be thought of as transformative inclusion. In a footnote, Mills argues further that the reconciliation paradigm assumes rather than argues a causal link between “reformative means and transformative ends” (165fn33).

To my mind, this point—an argument about theories of social change—is one of the most important contributions of the volume, one that also applies to the emphasis on prefigurative politics found in both the ‘resurgence’ paradigm as well as Tully’s conception of ‘transformative reconciliation’. Tully emphasizes the necessity of prefigurative politics and what might be thought of as ‘delinking’, while also drawing attention to the reasons why people continue to reproduce an exploitative and destructive form of life—from ideology to debt to the mode of production that we are all (differently) dependent on for social reproduction. The answer to this problem—prefigurative—strikes me as too voluntary. The question of transition, of how we get from here to there, is under theorized. Perhaps more engagement with the work that policy does and *could* do is needed. What policies enable transformation? What policies prevent it? If debt holds us in place, ought we to be pushing

for a debt jubilee? If we don't have time to engage in these alternative practices for various reasons, ought we to be pushing for the socialization of reproductive labour, a reduced work week, a universal basic income, a Green New Deal perhaps? This does not require the reduction of claims to redistributive ones for alongside these questions we should also ask: What are the presumptions implied in these policies? Do these policies require the relinquishment of self-activity? Do they require continued and new forms of dispossession, of resource extraction? This question of transition further suggests that there might be an implicit 'state debate' going on between these two paradigms—in terms of what the state *is* and what the state *could* do—that might be helpful to foreground explicitly.

As for the question of identity, the distinction between the paradigms is that 'resurgence' posits transformations of identity must precede decolonization, whereas 'reconciliation' asserts that transformation of the Indigenous-settler relationship is possible despite "broken" identities and relationships or that identity is always "dynamic, forever becoming" (138–9). Here Mills argues that resurgence tends to prescribe a "right list" of what counts as Indigenous content, overlooking a substantive form of "Indigenous lifeways" (142–3; compare though Simpson 2017). This overlooks questions of what identity one is turning towards: "what does Indigenous identity look like? ... How do we know? Who gets to say?" (141). As he and others rightly note, much is at stake in these questions: "authenticity policing", "ethno-nationalism", cisheteropatriarchy, etc. (141–2).

Offered in a spirit of "consideration" rather than prescription, Starblanket and Stark's essay is concerned with attending to "the ways in which relationality can either advance or constrain political movements, as well as the ways they can be invoked to either confront or insulate the violation of individual and collective well-being" (177). They raise these considerations at four contextual sites: knowledge, gender, land, and modernity. In terms of knowledge, Starblanket and Stark are interested in not only which sources are used, what counts as theory and what counts as story, but *how* they are used (179). They raise important concerns over how Indigenous knowledge is often made into an "additive to Western knowledge, eclipsing its transformative powers", a move that both contains and circumscribes (179). In terms of Asch's contribution, we might ask whether an emphasis on shared understanding eclipses the concerns, inventions, and innovations of Indigenous theories and actors? Does this have political implications, challenging the implicit theory of social change in Asch's account? Starblanket and Stark also question the way in which engagement with Indigenous knowledges tend to be driven by the concerns of the Western disciplines, rather than drivers of the questions deemed important (181). To my mind, these two concerns raise another fundamental question for those who are non-Indigenous thinking and acting with Indigenous theories and political movements: balancing the (potential) universalism of Indigenous theories and visions—the general, critical, and often emancipatory-transformative insights of Indigenous theories—with the particulars of the location of their enunciation.

In terms of gender, Starblanket and Stark draw our attention to the ways in which "the rhetoric of relationship can function to simultaneously centre Indigenous womanhood and close off Indigenous women's voices" (184). Indigenous women become cast as

“responsible for maintaining healthy relationships within Indigenous communities” at the same time as their political agency and visions are ‘minimized’ and ‘eclipsed’ (184). What’s more, this move relegates gender and sexual violence to the private sphere *and* “discounts the capacity for women to engage in vicious and abusive practices and overlooks forms of violence against queer Indigenous peoples” (185). This minimization occurs in the context of knowledge too: Indigenous women’s contributions to traditional political projects are often ignored, and while women invoking personal experiences are often read as anecdotal, men are applauded (186–7). Just as with the concern over containment and circumscription was raised in the context of knowledge, Starblanket and Stark point to the potential for containment and circumscription of ‘relationality’ if one does not attend to its gendered implications and articulations (188–9).

As for land, Starblanket and Stark are concerned with the potential for Indigenous struggles for land to transform relationships to land. For instance, “reifying statist notions of bounded space”, “eclips[ing] our focus on relationships to other aspects of Creation beyond the land, such as water and waterways”, “fix[ing] political formations that close off our rich understandings of relating to one another”, and “restrict[ing] Indigenous mobility by tethering Indigeneity to land” (189–190). Here too, the authors return to questions of knowledge and the risk of discussions of land that obscure the hard work of producing Indigenous knowledge rendering it instead as “natural and innate” (189–90). For Starblanket and Stark, and in agreement with Mills, “the greatest tool available to Indigenous peoples is not in the revitalization of our traditional practices but instead can be found in the *processes* that gave rise to these ever-growing and flourishing traditions” (192).

Borrows too dismisses a ‘natural’ or ‘essential’ connection between Indigeneity and sustainability, emphasizing the processes and work involved in establishing good relations with the earth and all its beings, along with the structural forces that obstruct good relations and the corresponding imperative of structural reform (49–51, 58, 60). More specifically, Borrows notes two material reasons for this connection. The first involves the mobility and reconnection between Indigenous peoples in cities and their homelands which “fuel[s] a political dynamic” whereby “the degradation of Indigenous land can be experienced as a degradation of Indigenous identity” leading Indigenous peoples to “often fight pipelines, dams, and mines that threaten to degrade the earth” (59–60). The second is the marginalizing effects of Indigenous poverty, which prevents “an investment in systems that create jobs and exploit the earth” while also requiring a greater dependence “upon one another” and thus “attention to the environmental circumstances that surround them” (*ibid.*). Still, Borrows recognizes that poverty and marginalization may also “cause [Indigenous] people to further degrade their environments in order to survive” (58). A somewhat odd example of Indigenous gangs is provided here (*ibid.*). Amidst the struggle led by the Unist’ot’en Camp over Coastal GasLink’s liquid natural gas pipeline in Northern British Columbia, where ‘confusion’ over the relevant authorities—band council versus hereditary governments—has in many ways eclipsed the reasons why people are forced into the choice of exclusion or extraction and subsequently the very political contestation of this choice, I cannot help but think an example like this might be more illuminating for the situation in which actors find themselves.

The last point that Starblanket and Stark make is that Indigenous modes of relating ought to be interpreted not as the opposite of modernity but a “*challenge* to modernity” (emphasis added, 199). Indigenous modes of relating “call[] into question [modernity’s] hegemonic claims and highlights the destructive and oppressive nature of its inherent logic by way of contrast, while also creating specific opportunities to bring forward the values and precepts underlying our traditional laws and values within contemporary contexts” (199). Again, the point is less to enact past practices in the present than to “understand these practices as the embodiment of values and beliefs that were given life in the past in relation to particular contexts, that have lived on in spite of efforts explicitly aimed at their erasure or assimilation, and that can continue to be given life anew” (200). This emphasis on the critical moment within Indigenous theory and political visions appears to be a challenge to the idea of reconciliation often premised on some underlying if obscured consensus or common ground.

Overall, Starblanket and Stark’s contribution is about the effects of power. They are interested in the indeterminacy of concepts, attending instead to their effects and illocutionary force. As they point out, relationality can be emancipatory or constraining depending on how it is used, by whom, and in which context. Tully too is interested in the indeterminacy of concepts. Yet his conceptual redescription of reconciliation seems to lose sight of the determinacy of context and the illocutionary force of the *rejection* of reconciliation. The illocutionary force of the rejection of reconciliation is related to its context: the rejection of reconciliation is *against* a political project of reconciliation that avoids questions of land and jurisdiction, containing and circumscribing Indigenous politics to the realm of distribution. In this sense, the rejection of reconciliation expresses something more than a “confusion” brought about by the English language (90). It also expresses something that cannot be addressed by invoking the indeterminacy of concepts, by distinguishing between a colonial and a transformative conception of reconciliation, *versohnung* from *vertagen*. That is, it ‘discloses’ constitutive social antagonisms—the gendered logic of elimination and the logic of capital to name but two (Coulthard 2014, A. Simpson 2016, L. Simpson 2017)—against the ideology of an underlying consensus or a projected common ground. Relatedly, the representation of resurgence as separation (5–6) which animates the ‘debate’ does not only seem to be a strawman given the emphasis on solidarity within the resurgence ‘paradigms’, but it seems to obscure the very real divisions and politics at play in what is read as separation: Who might form the alliances? Who ought one to be aligned with? How are these nations, groups, individuals to be articulated for the ends of a transformative project? If one already assumes an underlying consensus or common ground, the question and politics of articulation is off-the-table. This is the danger of reconciliation and its recuperation.