

## Book Review

Teichler, Hanna. 2021. *Carnivalizing Reconciliation: Contemporary Australian and Canadian Literature and Film Beyond the Victim Paradigm*. New York & Oxford: Berghahn Books. \$135.00/£99.00, pp 274 pages, bibliog., index

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In a world where the term “reconciliation” evokes multiple meanings and contentious tensions, Hanna Teichler’s *Carnivalizing Reconciliation: Contemporary Australian and Canadian Literature and Film Beyond the Victim Paradigm* problematizes and “carnivalizes” the term even further. Whereas previous notions of reconciliation operated within binary models of cultural and historical identities, Teichler’s formulation introduces the notion of the carnivalesque into the discourse, exposing “strategic fictions” and “lies that bind” (Teichler 24). Connecting Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the carnivalesque to a textual analysis of narrative fiction and film, Teichler challenges simplistic binary templates, venturing beyond the “politics of regret” and “national imaginaries of benevolence.” Teichler’s contribution comes at a socially poignant moment in Canada with the discovery of hundreds of unmarked graves on the grounds of former residential school sites. Unanswered questions linger about atonement, reconciliation and the slow progress made on the 94 Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC).

Polarizing discourse exists on the intrinsic value of the term “reconciliation” in a Canadian Context. TRC Commissioner Marie Wilson recalls that survivors chose the term “reconciliation”, whereas Indigenous scholars Billy Ray Belcourt, David Garneau, Leanne Simpson and Taiaiake Alfred comment on its inadequacy. Teichler appears to recognize both sides of the divide and creates a space through fiction and film where “reconciliation’s inner tensions and contradictions can become the subject of imaginative, playful and unpredictable explorations of identities and hierarchies that run

against reconciliation's 'official grain' " (Teichler 276). While identifying this space does not remedy the contradictions in the conception of reconciliation and even raises questions if the term is helpful at all, the carnivalesque lens serves to illuminate a step in the right direction.

Teichler's book directly articulates how processes of reconciliation perpetuate Indigenous victimhood. Apologies allow the nation to reinvent itself and take on a singular national history, whereas the idea of the carnivalesque produces a counter ideology that allows for the playful exploration of identities, hierarchies and reversals of power and shifts in the power paradigm. The close readings and contrasting texts that Teichler includes in her book, reveal the ways literature and films reinforce or dismantle Indigenous victimhood. In Chapter Four, Teichler contrasts Kim Scott's *Benang* and Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen*. In her analysis, she explores the reversal of victim and perpetrator relationships. Her key idea is that the transcultural configuration of victim and perpetrator can bring about a sense of reconciliation with colonial history. This troubling of victim/perpetrator binaries speaks to the instability of these categories. In a time when intergenerational effects continue to reverberate through families and communities, victims can become perpetrators. Through the vehicle of fiction, Teichler identifies how these categories are uncomfortably fluid.

Teichler does not shy away from addressing how texts can reinforce notions of Indigenous victimhood even when authors or directors have the best of intentions and attempt to benevolently contribute artistically to the reconciliation cause. In her chapter on Joseph Boyden's *Three Day Road* and Gail Jones's *Sorry*, she studies their alternative offerings to hegemonic collective memories. Boyden uses World War One theatres to create a vision of a transnational and transcultural space where identity negotiation can occur, and yet the chief negotiator Elijah Whiskeyjack, the embodiment of Indigenous past, present and future, is murdered as the "supposed windigo", Teichler says. While *Three Day Road* highlights transcultural entanglements, *Sorry* slips into revisionist history according to Teichler. *Sorry* focuses on the Keene family who moves from London to the Australian outback during World War Two, and delves into intergenerational settler guilt for the generations of aboriginal children removed from their families by the Australian government.

Additionally, in her study of the films, Teichler argues that Zacharias Kanuk's *Atanarjuat* pushes against and reverses colonial hierarchies while Baz Luhrmann's *Australia* recreates and strengthens Indigenous stereotypes. *Atanarjuat* challenges the colonial gaze and *Australia* through the relationship of Lady Ashley and Nullah reinforces the colonial gaze. Pointing out the ways in which texts and films ultimately fail in their construction shows how much further we have to still come in terms of Indigenous empowerment and representation. Curiously, I wonder how Teichler's analysis would have changed if she only focused on Indigenous authors and directors. While exploring multiple perspectives is effective in highlighting contrasts, I wonder if

an Indigenous-focused analysis would reinforce or refute her idea of Indigenous victimhood and the transcultural movement at play. It would be an interesting project to explore nonetheless.

The power of transcultural realities, entanglements and navigations resides as a central element of Teichler's analysis. In *Three Day Road*, Teichler identifies how Elijah recognizes boundaries and moves beyond them. His hybridity makes him a threat to authentic Indigenous identity. By demonstrating how Elijah personifies "the art of survival," Teichler shines a light on how Indigenous identity cannot be statically contained. Furthermore, Teichler accurately writes in her analysis of Kim Scott's *Benang* how the character of Harley reclaims the written word as a transcultural power that belongs to anyone and no one. The ludic play that Teichler identifies showcases the mediation of two language worlds, which makes an appearance in contemporary Indigenous literature. Both Elijah and Harley exist in an "in between" demonstrating how identity operates in flux and how attempts at overt simplification inevitably falls short.

Even though Teichler posits that the victim-centred processes of the TRC are "Janus-faced," and performances of reconciliation engage with a politics of regret, I still believe that the power of the stories told at the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission carried resonance. Even if the public appeared to respond in a disinterested fashion at the time, the recorded stories and personal memories carry a level of permanence that can affect future generations. Indigenous communities are still trying to heal from the aftereffects of intergenerational trauma, we should notice the spaces where celebrations of their identity take place.

In conclusion, *Carnivalizing Reconciliation* forces readers to trouble easy binaries and gaze more in depth into the "in between" and what resides there. While some narrative fictions fail to push past the limits of colonial frameworks and at times reinforce stereotypes instead of dismantling them, as Teichler has proven, there also lies generative power in the transcultural interactions at play. While the term reconciliation does hold many different tensions and contradictions, there is much to be learned from pondering a space where identities are fluid, and national containers and their histories are examined and expanded.

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