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Hanna Teichler: *Carnivalizing Reconciliation. Contemporary Australian and Canadian Literature and Film beyond the Victim Paradigm*

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Hanna Teichler's book *'Carnivalizing Reconciliation: Contemporary Australian Literature and Film Beyond the Victim Paradigm'*, the eighth volume published in the *Worlds of Memory* series by Berghahn Books, is an outstanding contribution to understanding how culture compliments, destabilises, and exceeds official attempts by settler-colonial societies like Australia and Canada to reconcile their Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations.

In Chapter 1, Teichler discusses the apologies of former Canadian prime minister Stephen Harper to victims of the Indian Residential School System, and of former Australian prime minister Kevin Rudd to members of the Stolen Generations, as well as the legislative and political processes that led to and followed these momentous events. Inspired by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa and similar commissions in South America, these popular reconciliatory approaches can suspend or temporarily reverse power relations, bringing stories of Indigenous suffering from the peripheries of settler-colonial societies like Australia and Canada to the centre.

While Teichler acknowledges the merits of the framework of reconciliation in Australia and Canada, she writes: "It enables the government to reinvent itself as the enabler of reconciliation and new beginnings without the potentially dire consequences of court proceedings and constitution changes" (43). According to Teichler: "Australian and Canadian 'politics of regret', thus conceived, are at risk of becoming self-serving endeavors, because they primarily enable a reconciliation of settler societies with their colonial past" (45). 'Sorry politics' allow two states founded on colonial violence to reinvent themselves as agents of reconciliation while confining their Indigenous peoples to victimhood, ultimately reinforcing an 'us and them' dichotomy. Teichler writes: "Central to both reconciliation endeavors discussed here are the stories of the victims and survivors, but this centrality is also complicit in fostering a specific identity template in relation to the Stolen Generations and Indian residential school survivors: continuous victimhood" (46). In October 2023, Australians were asked in a referendum to recognise Indigenous Australians in the constitution through the establishment of a Voice to Parliament. Teichler's criticism of the victim paradigm as reductive in *'Carnivalizing Reconciliation'* is particularly timely given that the debate surrounding the Voice to Parliament saw the 'No campaign' use identity templates such as victim/perpetrator and Indigenous/non-Indigenous to question some

of their opponents' intentions by raising the spectre of reparations and exclude even more of their opponents' opinions on spurious grounds of 'inauthenticity'.

In her second chapter, Teichler examines how others have reframed Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque to argue that "the act of storytelling framed by truth and reconciliation processes entails the possibility of a transitory reversal of social hierarchies and leads to empowerment through countering hegemonial understandings of national narratives and identities" (63). While a Bakhtinian carnival of reconciliation can suspend power relations and reverse the positions of powerful and powerless, it remains a play of binary opposites. Teichler writes that "reconciliation processes cater to advocates of cultural essentialism and authenticity, and they rely on the rather simplistic identity schemes that form the structural basis for reconciliation" (68). Teichler proposes that we "reconsider what is at the core of Bakhtin's idea of carnivalesque reversal: the (playful) exploration of others by fools and tricksters who paint outside the lines that reconciliation provides" (80). In the following chapters of her book, Teichler eloquently analyses several cultural productions that render characters who fulfill identity templates without crossing the lines that define them. However, the strength of 'Carnivalizing Reconciliation' is when Teichler discusses several literary texts and a feature film that provide us with "imaginings of perpetrators and perpetration, of victims who turned the tables on those who harmed them, or bring to our attention the plurifold transcultural entanglements that a nuanced engagement with Indigenous cultural reeducation ultimately bears witness to" (80-81).

In Chapter 3, Teichler compares the 2005 novel 'Three Day Road' by Canadian writer Joseph Boyden and the 2007 novel 'Sorry' by Australian writer Gail Jones. Teichler writes: "While Boyden's novel becomes an experimental and experiential site of negotiating historical representations and transcultural identities, Jones's text literally aches under the burden the author's 'good intentions' place on the narrative" (89). In the character Elijah Weesageechak, Boyden creates a transcultural trickster: "The trickster is a hybrid figure, a character who operates at the margins of a given collective, because he likes to appear in contexts where he can put a finger on hypocrisy and deficiency" (105). Boyden, himself accused of falsely claiming Indigeneity, creates a character who "embodies a strand of Indigenous identity that points beyond itself, and may as such be counted as a vision of future indigenalities" (108). For Teichler, this future Indigeneity "will not exist in seclusion anymore, [...] but will be prone to influences from other cultures, histories, and mentalities" (108). By contrast, Teichler writes that Jones avoids speaking for Indigenous Australian victims of forcible removal, but "invents a traumatized settler daughter who finds herself voiceless and speechless" (111). In doing so, "Jones avoids speaking for Australia's Aboriginals, considering it 'the right thing to do', but effectively silences them, precisely because her Aboriginal characters have little to no agency" (111). While Jones, through the young but wise settler daughter Perdita, does much to write back to the British ignorance of and cruelty towards Indigenous Australians as a portent of the progressive, white Australian attitudes of today, "Jones reactivates the stereotype of the 'noble savage' in order to contest it" (119). In 'Sorry', Teichler writes: "natives are grouped together in the outback, looking rather ragged and filthy, and appear to be weary

of their own existence" (111). While neither Jones nor Boyden explodes the identity templates confining Indigeneity to stereotypes, Teichler powerfully argues that, despite the controversy surrounding Boyden, 'Three Day Road' imagines a truly transcultural character before killing him for transgressing authenticity.

In Chapter 4, Teichler compares two novels by Indigenous writers: 'Benang' by Australian Kim Scott and 'Kiss of the Fur Queen' by Canadian Tomson Highway. In 'Benang', Scott's protagonist Harley challenges the confinement of Indigenous peoples to victimhood, while in 'Kiss of the Fur Queen', Highway's antagonist, paedophile priest Father Lafleur, becomes a transcultural perpetrator. Harley turns the tables on his Euro-Australian grandfather Ern, who had envisioned in Harley the culmination of a genetic experiment to 'breed out' Indigeneity, by forcing the invalid Ern to accompany him on a mission to reclaim his ancestry. Teichler writes: "Harley's personal quest—the retrieval of family history—blends into and merges with the powerful narratives of colonial dominance and racism on the one hand and resilience and survival on the other" (143). Father Lafleur becomes, in the eyes of his young Cree victims, the 'Weetigo': "The purveyor of utmost evil and moral decay in First Nations mythology" (174). Teichler writes: "To transculturalize the perpetrator, to temporarily reverse and relocate one's sense of whose culture the perpetrator actually belongs to is programmatic for Highway's novel" (176). Indeed, "[h]ighway detaches both victim and perpetrator from their allocated place in the logic of cultural belonging" (176). Teichler's discussion of how 'Benang' and 'Kiss of the Fur Queen' carnivalise the victim/perpetrator paradigm recalls the novel 'Senselessness' by Honduran-Salvadoran writer Horacio Castellanos Moya. The unnamed, non-Indigenous narrator of 'Senselessness' is tasked with line-editing one thousand one hundred pages of the testimony provided by the mostly Indigenous victims of atrocities committed during the Guatemalan Civil War for eventual publication in a report by the Guatemalan truth and reconciliation committee. The narrator of 'Senselessness' is a self-styled poet obsessed with the rich imagery of the testimonies. His mistreatment of the personal stories of suffering leads to an overidentification with both the victims and perpetrators, transforming and eventually destroying him in a way that portends the fate of any society that cannot take the evidence of its injustices on face value or commit to the process of reconciliation in good faith.

The focus of Teichler's final chapter shifts from literary texts to two feature films: 'Atanarjuat' by Inuit filmmaker Zacharius Kunuk and 'Australia' by Australian director and Hollywood royalty Baz Luhrmann. While 'Atanarjuat' is focused solely on representing an Inuit story that precedes European colonisation, Teichler deftly analyses its filmic qualities and play with genres to argue that "it is capable of representing transcultural entanglements" (185). Similarly, Teichler praises 'Australia' for the way that it "carnivalizes the formative bush myth—usually associated with male Euro-Australian agency—and opens it up to those who were structurally and discursively excluded from this national narrative" (186). While 'Atanarjuat' is a culmination of consultations with the Inuit community that has kept the central myth that serves as its plot alive through its oral tradition, Teichler writes: "Kunuk's film undermines the colonial gaze while at the same time subverting its counterpart—the ethnographic gaze that literally

looks for authentic indigeneity” (187). By telling an Inuit story and tackling the reductive representations of Inuit people in earlier Canadian films that served to compliment the colonial project: “The film transforms objects into subjects, both with regard to political ideologies and the pitfalls of the medium of film” (199). Whereas Teichler argues that Luhrmann’s blockbuster “is not a voice of, but a voice for the Aboriginals”, adding that it “might even fortify a specific stereotypical image of the Aboriginal, namely the noble savage” (208). Like ‘Sorry’, ‘Australia’ points towards the more progressive attitudes of present-day Australia because it “breaks open the male, misogynist, racist discourse of the bush myth and transforms it into a testimony to multicultural Australia” (211). However: “It does not foreground and imagine an independent notion of indigeneity”, but “is satisfied with assimilating the Aboriginals into the Australian national narrative” (219).

‘Carnivalizing Reconciliation’ makes clear that ostensibly progressive, ‘politically correct’ novels and films can repeat reductive stereotypes in their rush to reconcile the violent colonial pasts of countries like Australia and Canada with the multicultural present. More challenging, even problematic texts and particular characterisations can suspend the play of binary opposites, shatter identity templates, and shift the victim/perpetrator paradigm of the ‘politics of regret’ to point towards a transcultural future. In this way, Teichler’s book advocates for the transgressive potential of art and promotes the idea that audiences can imagine more than a temporary reversal of power relations and can instead upend social hierarchies altogether.