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BOOK REVIEW

Exploring Cultural Traffic

Peter Beilharz. 2015, *Thinking the Antipodes: Australian Essays*, Melbourne: Monash University Publishing, ISBN 9781922235558. RRP AU\$39.95 (pb)

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Thinking the Antipodes brings together some twenty-four of Peter Beilharz's essays that were first published or presented between 1989 and 2013. They are here grouped into two streams, namely themes (essays one through nine) and thinkers (ten to twenty-four). The former stream foregrounds institutional analyses, several of which are predicated upon, and enriched by, comparisons and contrasts with New Zealand. The thinkers grouping is devoted to identifying and celebrating the work of a handful of Australian intellectuals, including John Anderson, V. Gordon Childe, Robert Hughes, Jean Martin, Hugh Stretton and, above all, art historian Bernard Smith. The evaluations are nuanced, but characteristically generous in the best sense of the term, including acknowledging any contrasts with Beilharz's own theoretical position, but otherwise emphasising what is valuable in the work and lives of these scholars. They also incidentally accord recognition to the differences between Australian cities. The two essays on Robert Hughes are particularly fine, suggesting that a full-length biography would perfectly complement Beilharz's study of Bernard Smith.

It was therefore tempting—albeit briefly—to title this review 'Mods and Ockers'. This would, however, both belie Beilharz's seriousness of purpose and actively mislead as to his theoretical stance, in that his chosen themes and thinkers typically interrogate any presumption of a binary distinction between cosmopolitan urbanity and local provincialism. For what shapes this essay collection is the Bernard Smith-inspired insight that the antipodes should be understood as a relationship rather than a place and that it/they are constituted through cultural traffic.

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Nationalism, understood as that place in which nuance too easily mutates into essence, typically gets a bad academic press, and Beilharz is at pains to demonstrate how his account of the antipodes avoids getting trapped into such a conceptual cul-de-sac. But having explicitly barred nationalism from entering by the front door, there are occasions when his felicities of style threaten to admit a variant of its essentialism through the back. This is because the essay as a cultural form allows for, indeed actively encourages, the migration of personal pronouns and their attendant adjectives, 'I' and 'my', 'we' and 'our', into the body of the text. The signifiers of collectivity, in particular, are at once splendidly promiscuous and alarmingly indeterminate. That Beilharz recognises the pleasures and dangers that are attendant upon their use is signalled by his citation of a phrase from an *Australian* editorial claiming that Robert Hughes 'appeared unaware of how much we had changed'. (246) To which Beilharz adds: 'The "we" is indicative, though this is of course the aspirant voice of the nation, via its sole daily national newspaper. But the judgement also has clout.' (246) In his own employment of such words the rhetorical effect is, for the most part, simply to link author and individual reader. Nevertheless, either continuing ambiguity or the prospect of premature closure seems intrinsic to their use. This is graphically exposed in Pat Barker's war novel *The Ghost Road*, in which her protagonist comes to 'realise there's another group of words that still mean something. Little words that trip through sentences unregarded: us, them, we, they, here, there. These are the words of power.'¹ (Barker goes on to dramatise the point by adding that 'long after we're gone, they'll lie about in the language, like the unexploded grenades in these fields, and any one of them'll take your hand off'. I hasten to add that it is ambiguity rather than menace—and then only occasionally—that features in Peter Beilharz's otherwise lucid prose.)

The kind of informed comparisons of Australia and New Zealand, written by a single author, that make up some of the early chapters of this book are still relatively rare; Frank Castles and Peter Beilharz are the best, and the best known, exemplars. Useful anthologies such as the *Quicksands* collection on foundational histories, or the *Twin Peeks* volume on cinema are altogether more typical of such trans-Tasman endeavours, but what is also typical is that their multi-authored interpretations of one or the other society, tend to place the onus on the reader to try and bring them into a more symmetrical and productive comparison.² In Beilharz's case he knowingly, sympathetically and legitimately employs the New Zealand material in this book in order to illuminate the Australian experience. My only caveat is that this may lead to a premature foreclosure on the ongoing contestation of the smaller country's institutional characteristics.

For example, in considering whether New Zealand and Australia were ever Fordist, Beilharz makes play with David Craig's account of the Trekka, a 'made in New Zealand' hybrid car that had Czech Skoda mechanicals. (55) This was at a time in the late sixties and early seventies when New Zealand had some sixteen small-scale vehicle plants responsible for the local assembly of the cars of global manufacturers from imported components. During its seven years of production the Trekka sold some 2500 units. It—and indeed the other car plants—were thereby an indication of the country's unlikely candidature for mass production and mass consumption status (certainly not in anything like its American form). This productive falling short of Fordist ideals prompted New Zealand artist Michael Stevenson to feature the Trekka in his contribution to the Venice Biennale, as an ironic extended metaphor

1 Pat Barker, *The Ghost Road*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1996, p. 257.

2 Klaus Neumann, Nicholas Thomas and Hilary Ericksen (eds), *Quicksands*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney 1999; Deb Verhoeven (ed.), *Twin Peeks: Australian and New Zealand Feature Films*, Damned Publishing, Melbourne, 1999.

for the society in which it was produced. Not Fordism then, but rather a bricolage that is both congruent with the local conceit that New Zealand culture exemplifies a resourceful and imaginative making-do, and also offers a convenient contrast to the Australian case.

Fordism was, of course, much more than a manufacturing initiative; it was, in David Noble's phrase, a design for America.³ But note also that Henry Ford had actually got the very idea of the assembly line from observing the overhead trolleys employed by Chicago's meat packers to transport beef. So if you look not to the manufacture of cars, but rather to the farm animal *dis*-assembly lines in the meatworks that were integral to those export receipts on which the New Zealand economy and society were wholly dependent, then a suitably antipodean (in)version of Fordism can begin to come into view. It is a variant with its own distinctive accommodation of organised labour, pattern of state intervention and mass marketing model, in which the country's many thousands of family farms could be said to act as both a Keynesian-style multiplier and a functional counterpart to Detroit's (or indeed Toyota's) subcontractors.

Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* shares with Beilharz a scepticism towards the theoretical utility of a geographical anchorage of culture.⁴ But Gilroy goes further in conceiving of the Atlantic as a single object of inquiry that is the product of the diaspora enforced by slavery. He explicitly repudiates nationalist and ethnically absolutist approaches in favour of a transnational and intercultural perspective that is quite literally at sea, symbolised by ships in motion and made manifest by a culture that is not specifically African, American, Caribbean or British, but all of these and all at once. It finds material expression above all through music, but also in the work of such black writers as Richard Wright and Toni Morrison.

My suggestion is that bringing the Black Atlantic to bear upon the White Pacific has the effect of amplifying and directing attention towards some embryonic and emergent features of Beilharz's analyses. In his essay on George Seddon, for example, Beilharz is prompted to imagine Seddon's authorship of a parallel text to Bernard Smith's classic work, in which it is not paintings but the garden or backyard that provides a route into understanding the antipodean. (262) This would be to not just broaden the empirical basis for the investigation of antipodality, but also to extend it conceptually. If then, as with Gilroy, music is added to the mix, this opens the way to expressly acknowledging that whether or not a densely saturated media environment is understood to be axiomatically retrograde, it is assuredly theoretically consequential. It is by citing Ralph Ellison's recourse to a visual arts analogy in his account of the inner dynamics of jazz production, that Gilroy provides a conceptual link to Beilharz and Smith's reliance upon so specific a cultural form. In Ellison's words:

*True jazz is an art of individual assertion within and against the group. Each true jazz moment ... springs from a contest in which the artist challenges all the rest; each solo flight, or improvisation represents (like the canvasses of a painter) a definition of his [sic] identity: as individual, as member of the collectivity and as a link in the chain of tradition.*⁵

3 David Noble, *America by Design: Science, Technology, and the Rise of Corporate Capitalism*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1977.

4 Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1993.

5 Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, Random House, New York, 1964, p. 234, cited by Gilroy, p. 79.

Gilroy goes on to note how, within the Black Atlantic's expressive culture, music has come to be understood as a key component of 'what might loosely be called their critical social theories' in what is an anti-hierarchical tradition of thought.

In his book length study of Bernard Smith, Beilharz could be said to have reciprocated by providing a link of his own to Gilroy in suggesting that Smith had taken to heart Hegel's dynamic image of master and slave as integral to modernity, in 'how they entrap each other in evanescent bonds of mental and firmer kind, how it is that culture also works as a form of power which holds together asymmetrical relations of domination'.⁶ The implication of this formulation is that there may be affinities between the experiences of convicts and the manifestly more horrific institution of slavery, but that such a perspective depends upon an understanding of how the worlds that they subsequently made mark their respective entries into the modern.

Beilharz is at pains to point out that that Smith's contribution to antipodean theory depends upon recognition of him as a historian of art rather than as a contemporary critic. That said, and given Beilharz's explicit acknowledgement of how his own understanding of the Thesis Eleven project has been subject to challenge and change, it is tempting to speculate on how contemporary art might illustrate or interrogate antipodality. A case in point is the Australian artist Imants Tillers's *Paradiso*, a work that is knowingly informed by something akin to the Beilharz/Smith perspective and concerned to extend it by what is, in effect, the enactment of its own social theory.⁷ Thus the title of the work is an anagram of diaspora, a word inscribed across the chest of the painting's central Christ-like figure, which is surrounded by appropriated images of antipodean and European art works. For artists like Tillers, Tim Johnson, Gordon Bennett, Michael Parekowhai and John Pule, some such theoretical awareness has become something of a commonplace and is so securely sedimented within their artistic practice that it increasingly acts to put received versions of theory under pressure, while yet being impervious to capture by such neo-orthodoxies as Jameson's contrast between parody and pastiche. There is a discernable affinity between the wide-ranging and accomplished essays in this book and such models of artistic practice. Both do their cultural work down among the details. What this review has therefore sought to show is that, whether in the form of an elucidation or as a provocation, *Thinking the Antipodes* is 'good to think with'.

About the author

Nick Perry is Emeritus Professor in the Department of Film, Television and Media Studies at the University of Auckland, New Zealand. His most recent book is *Ruling Passions: Essays on Just About Everything* (2012).

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⁶ Peter Beilharz, *Imagining the Antipodes: Culture, Theory and the Visual in the Work of Bernard Smith*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1997, p. 94.

⁷ Retrieved from <http://www.aucklandartgallery.com/explore-art-and-ideas/artwork/12678/paradiso> on 18 August 016.

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