

**Clare Archer-Lean. *Cross-Cultural Analysis of the Writings of  
Thomas King and Colin Johnson (Mudrooroo).***

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Archer-Lean's book is an analysis of *representations* and *representativeness*. The context is the post-colonial and post-modern end of the millennium in settler societies like Australia and Canada, where the traditional Eurocentric notions of identity and representation are challenged by the rising voices of Indigenous discourses. Comparing two distant and apparently diverse writers like the Indigenous Canadian Thomas King and the Indigenous Australian Colin Johnson, Archer-Lean pursues the similarities that unite their projects in undermining the past representations of Indigeneity. The differences between the two – cultural, thematic, stylistic – are thus acknowledged but partially put aside, in an attempt to focus on the ways in which both authors deal with the question of identity and the act of textual representation. The cross-cultural analysis centres on in the two writers' common focus on semiotic fields and meta-discursive and intertextual practices aimed at unmasking the colonial discourses. The works analysed are mainly the novels of the two authors: whereas Johnson has written also poetry and plays, and King film, television and radio drama scripts, Archer-Lean limits her analysis to their novelistic production. Another self-imposed limit is in the theoretical approach: whereas the analysis draws from a wide range of theoretical sources, post-modern and feminist interpretations are almost omitted, and post-colonial theory is used "critically" because of King's and Johnson's similar scepticism about it; post-colonial terminology like "rehearsal," "hybridity" and "magic realism" informs the book but is revisited and re-appropriated.

A few problems arise from this methodological positioning. First of all, Archer-Lean is an Anglo-Australian scholar, a potentially problematic vantage point in a discussion of politics of Indigenous identity and representation. Cognisant of the risks of romanticisation and re-colonisation that a white identity and an academic position entail, she chooses as interpretative strategy to eschew questions of “authenticity” and “correctness” and to enter into a dialogue with the texts while acknowledging partiality and incompleteness. Another potential problem is the identity of Colin Johnson, whose “Aboriginality” was contested in 1996. The book however does not deal with biographical questions of authenticity and identity, but rather analyses how these notions are challenged and undermined by the two writers; the focus of the analysis are the texts, the textual identities established by the colonisers and the subversive textual strategies of the Indigenous authors. The central notion is thus *re-presentation*: the hyphen rejects, on the one hand, traditionally stable and fixed representations which homogenise and prescribe identities, and, on the other, “the readers’ desires for the author to act as a ‘representative’ Indigenous person” (14). The emphasis is on the dismantling and destabilising of hierarchies and binary oppositions (Native vs non-Native, for example) in favour of fluid, hybrid and contradictory textual expressions.

The central trope of both authors is identified in the need to “*open up the universe and, consequently, notions of re-presentation*” (37). Political subversion coincides therefore with the blurring of boundaries and their meanings and with the consequent legitimisation of multiple and changing Indigenous identities. King’s and Johnson’s literary *oeuvre* exist beyond neatly defined genres – which are legacy of the West: their narratives embrace fluidity and thus reveal Indigenous realities silenced by the Western construction of the Imaginary Indigenous. This “contamination” of the borders goes beyond a combative opposition and refuses to embrace simple counter-discourses: the central concept is rather “re-negotiation” (44), a creative enactment that both contests colonial conceptions and representations and operates within and beyond them. Process, border-crossing, continuous movement work as a “frame” that includes and dissolves re-presentation: thus “Indigenous identity becomes a space that exists simultaneously beyond and within geographical place” (55).

King’s and Johnson’s works are analysed and compared by Archer-Lean through thematic lines: first of all their common deconstructing and re-framing of colonial texts. Both authors parody and re-write North American and Australian classics like *Robinson Crusoe*, *Moby Dick*, the *Lone Ranger* series and the *Augustus Robinson Chronicles* respectively: the image of the indigene in the colonial narratives is identified as the foundational con-

struct, satirically explored and thus exploded and re-invented. Then Archer-Lean shows how two colonial grand narratives, Christianity in King's work and Gothicism in the case of Johnson's, are deployed and played with by the two authors: Christian ideology and the Gothic "sub-conscious set of images" (126) are unmasked as imperial tools perpetrating the colonisation process, but simultaneously "incorporated," de-authorised and re-appropriated. "Incorporation" is here an important concept: colonial narratives are not merely negated, but rather appropriated in a process of resistive empowerment that is thus *performative* and not *prescriptive*. The following theme is the re-inscription of the notion of "loss": in the negotiation of contemporary identities in Canada and Australia, the "quest" for identity, deployed within concepts of time and place, becomes a "non-teleological process" (199) that eschews the idea of a destination. It is the quest itself that matters, a re-presentation of identity as fluidity and role-playing. The central part of the book is therefore the analysis of the trickster and of trickster discourse in the two authors: Archer-Lean deploys Gerald Vizenor's concept of the trickster to show how the trickster as playful, ambiguous and changing character is a central figure in Indigenous writing, but also how trickster discourse as disruption, creation, subversion and ambiguity informs and shapes King's and Johnson's projects as a whole. The trickster is not *representative* of Indigenous life and is not involved in *representation*, and as such works as a contesting and contrasting discourse against the Eurocentric "fixation" (and "fixing") of the semiotic field of the indigene: chance, open-endedness, strategic repetitions abrogate any sense of closure and allow for the world "to be rebuilt endlessly" (260). The final motif analysed is the postcolonial technique of "magic realism" as a means to create a pan-Indigenous and multi-layered space able to free and empower notions of place and time.

The thesis of the book thus leads the analysis beyond a simple comparative exercise: showing how *re-presentation* challenges *representativeness* in the work of two Indigenous writers, Archer-Lean does not merely "compare" particular narrative strategies and thematic lines; the scope of this book is not confined within the comfortable limits of literary analysis and academic concerns. Rather, it opens up to the much more interesting and actual issue of *identity* "in the border condition of the twenty-first century" (36): King and Johnson are not taken as "representatives" of Indigenous identities, or of Indigenous writers, or even of the post-colonial condition; rather, their works is read in the hope of opening up discussion and debate about ways of re-presenting identities, about cultural, social and textual exchange, about the politics of challenging the desire for stable, fixed and neatly identifiable positions, genres and identities. The condition

of the border and its “contamination” is shown as essential to the two Indigenous writers, but it is also the position from where Archer-Lean writes and what she proposes as a different zone of understanding.

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