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## Review of *Contemporary American Indian Writing: Unsettling Literature* By Dee Horne

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*Contemporary American Indian Writing: Unsettling Literature*. By Dee Horne. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1999. xxii + 218 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. \$24.95 paper.

In *Mixedblood Messages: Literature, Film, Family, Place* (1998), Louis Owens critiques a formative study of postcolonial literature, *The Empire Writes Back* (1990), because it “ignores entirely the impressive body of literature written by American Indian authors.” Such an “omission,” he suggests, is symptomatic of American Indian literature’s marginalization even within marginalized literary studies. Dee Horne’s *Contemporary American Indian Writing: Unsettling Literature* seeks to remedy this omission by reading selected First Nations authors through the lens of postcolonial theory. Horne’s overarching goal is to explore the ways in which American Indian writers, to borrow Audre Lorde’s formulation, use the “master’s” linguistic and narrative “tools” to dismantle the “master’s house,” an act, Horne writes, akin to “dancing along the precipice.” The guiding theoretical questions of her study, drawn from Bakhtin, Said, and Bhabha, as well

as King, Silko, and Rose, are enfolded in her opening discussion of “subversive mimicry” and “creative hybridity” as dual strategies used by American Indian writers “to dismantle the colonial discourse and its rules of recognition” while offering alternatives to that discourse in the form of transformative, fluid visions of American Indian identity. Each chapter then focuses on how major First Nations authors wield “trickster” strategies, ranging from satire and silences to subversive stereotyping and shame, in order to “unsettle the colonial relationship” while creating “dialogues in which settlers may participate in the process of decolonization.”

By focusing on six First Nations writers—Lee Maracle, Ruby Slipperjack, Jeannette Armstrong, Beatrice Culleton, Tomson Highway, and Thomas King—and by bringing attention to some of the cultural matrices informing each text, whether Ojibway or Okanagan, Métis, or Cree, Horne suggests a more mobile American Indian literary studies moving across what is to many Indian nations an arbitrary boundary-line. Given the absence of First Nations writers from many American Indian literature classes in the United States, Horne’s study invites much-needed comparative study of these texts. At the same time, by consistently referring to these writers as American Indian rather than as First Nations, and by using a globalized theoretical framework, Horne argues for the stance she sees taken by Armstrong’s border-crossing novel, *Slash*, which “forges a hybrid ‘Indian’ identity that is multinational to better resist colonialism.” Not only does she link narrative strategies of Native writers with those who elsewhere write within and against colonial systems, she envisions the transformative effects on readers from across the spectrum of colonial experience by claiming that “the subversive strategies used by the writers addressed . . . have relevance to all writers and readers engaged in the ongoing process of decolonization.”

Yet the strengths of this approach are also its weakness. In thinking globally, one may find it more difficult to see how such texts act

locally. In other words, border-crossing should not come at the expense of analyses anchored to geographical and cultural specificity. In a related way, Horne’s study does not explicitly tackle the ongoing debate within American Indian literary studies over the very use of postcolonial discourse and its relation to indigenous-based theory. For example, she explores how Highway and King “reconfigure the traditional Trickster tale” without an overt analysis of how anti-colonial strategies thus also reside within Native cultures, not just within imported theory. More troubling, at the beginning of her analysis of *Green Grass, Running Water* Horne cites King’s opposition to both the term “postcolonial” and its implications, but then sidesteps his objections by saying his is a “limited definition of post-colonialism.” In doing so, she includes but dismisses his point that, even if forged against colonialism, postcolonial theory has been forged elsewhere, thus importing a vocabulary and set of assumptions that can subsume the very texts it hopes to celebrate.

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