Regis Tove Stella’s book is the twentieth in the Pacific Islands Monograph Series, the fourth in the series by an indigenous Pacific Islander, and the second by a citizen of Papua New Guinea. Furthermore, it extends the conceptual framework of the series with its consideration of literary theory in both colonial and postcolonial contexts. For all these reasons, it commends itself to readers’ attention.

Stella’s volume is a “slightly expanded” version of his doctoral thesis (xiii), and focuses on the “representation and the construction of the PNG subject in colonialist writing and how PNG writers have challenged and interrogated such representations” (10). Representation and interpretation are thus key concepts. It is also clear that the author regards all representation as ultimately political, whether to establish and maintain colonial power or to contest that power in the postcolonial era.

The book opens by laying out a theoretical framework drawing on writers like Homi Bhabha and Edward Said, as well as the author’s thesis adviser, Bill Ashcroft. Following are chapters that contrast indigenous representations of PNG locations with those of the colonizer. Stella argues that simply by replacing indigenous place-names with their own (eg, Port Moresby), colonizers establish claims to political authority. But this colonizing landscape is ambivalent: mysterious, romantic, and idyllic on the one hand; harsh and inhospitable on the other (48). Though leading white men to madness and savagery, it is also considered an ideal location for adventure, in which boys can become men (61).

Four chapters then set out more colonialist discourse, now framing the PNG subject in legal terms, as “child,” “savage,” or “sexualized body.” Here again Stella stresses the ambivalence inherent in the colonial situation. The law operates with a “discourse of contamination” to separate colonizer from indigene (97). This separation is necessary because “savagery” represents an ever-present danger to the colonizer—a danger that is not only physical but also psychological, as in the trope of the white man degenerating to the level of the native (124).

The native seen as child would require nurturance, yet for decades there was no official educational policy in Papua New Guinea. Rather, education was left to the missions (106). Ambivalence continues when the native is portrayed as a sexualized body. The law had constructed New Guinean men as rapists, real or potential (140), but the females were seen as both desirable and repugnant, a trope that has “not only racial, but also political, social, and economic underpinnings” (153). These sections make particularly painful reading for those observers of pre-independence Papua New Guinea who are all too familiar with the stereotypes Stella demonstrates to telling effect.

Chapters 8 and 9 provide relief from the colonialist literature that has
gone before, when Stella takes up the countervailing discourse of indigenous writers. The first of these chapters describes writing before independence, and the second, the notably different postindependence literature. Works by PNG authors before independence employ as a dominant trope that of the angry indigene (187). After independence, themes include disillusionment and disenchantment (189), with alcohol as a powerful symbol of Western excess (203). Readers familiar only with the earlier literature will be particularly enlightened by Stella’s examination of the latter. A brief concluding chapter recapitulates what has gone before, underlining the basic point that “writers are never neutral with regard to the forces within which they operate, and the imagination seldom escapes the political direction of social discourse” (206).

By moving into theoretical territory different from most of the volumes in the Pacific Island Monograph Series, Imagining the Other is bound to be provocative. This is especially true because of Stella’s insistence on the political nature of representation, since politics are by definition oppositional. Readers’ responses are also likely to be affected by the extent to which they accept or reject the conceptual framework that shapes the entire work. Yet here there is something of a paradox.

It seems to me that it is precisely those who accept that framework who will see some shortcomings in the work. I believe that such shortcomings as do appear stem from the book’s origins as a thesis, particularly repetition. Having outlined his guiding theory at the beginning, is the author required to repeat these points throughout the fascinating substantive material that follows? Perhaps I am the only reader who will occasionally feel impatience, thinking “I agree, I agree, now get on with it.”

What I see as the great strength of this book is Stella’s continuing emphasis on the ambivalence inevitable in the colonial situation. Here is where the author makes adroit use of Homi Bhabha’s work (though he might also have made more of Georges Balandier, whose 1963 Sociologie Actuelle de l’Afrique Noire appears in the bibliography but not much in the text). Observers of pre-independence Papua New Guinea were well aware that the colonizing project was hardly uniform, as missions, commercial interests, and administration were often in conflict—divisions that indigenes were sometimes able to exploit, even from their relatively powerless position. Stella’s analysis of how colonizer discourse framed the PNG subject in different ways (child, savage, sexualized) is an ingenious approach to these diverse interests. The PNG colonial situation, like others in the world, was thus complex and permeated with ambiguity.

To sum up: Despite some minor shortcomings, this book will not only provoke discussion but also, for many readers, expand their approach to the history of Papua New Guinea. It is a worthwhile addition to what continues to be a distinguished series of monographs.

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