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Unstable Images: Colonial Discourse of New Ireland, Papua New Guinea, 1875-1935

Brenda Johnson Clay

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The subject of colonialism encompasses a multitude of analytic concerns about the nature and extent of political controls, economic inequalities, and social hierarchies. Underlying the varied conditions of power and subordination are the diverse, sometimes contested representations of human difference that motivate, support, or question colonial practices and projects. *Unstable Images* concentrates a critical gaze on this discursive side of colonialism through close readings of a series of Western texts on the people of New Ireland from the 1870s to the 1930s—when the status of the New Ireland–New Britain region changed from precolonial to German control and finally to a League of Nations mandated Australian administration.

By narrowing her focus in both space and time, Brenda Clay reveals new insights into the complex dynamics through which images of "self" and "other" are continually transformed. Engaging with the current literature on both colonialism! and processes of creativity within cross-cultural encounters, *Unstable Images* provides an in-depth analysis of Western colonial representations along with a reflective ethnographic understanding of islander responses. Through selective, careful reading of these texts—written for the most part by missionaries and anthropologists—Clay imparts a sense of the complexities and ambiguities inherent in colonial socialities. She purports that representations of "otherness" are essentially unstable, observable in ambivalence, contradictions, ambiguities, and alterations within and between discourses. Colonial situations did not produce mere echoes from the metropolis but instead yielded diverse discursive performances emerging out of local contingencies.

Although the examined representations occur within, or just prior to, the institution of colonialism in the islands, *Unstable Images* is a perceptive look at the processes through which people formulate and express motivating separations between themselves and others. It will prompt readers to rethink previous conceptions about the colonial encounter and contribute substantially to postcolonial debates.

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