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The “unstable images” examined in Brenda Johnson Clay’s new book have to do with the “representation of human differences and separations” generated in colonial discourses (p. 1). More specifically, they are the products of five Methodist missionaries and two anthropologists who visited or resided in New Ireland between 1876 and the mid-1930s and wrote about their experiences, in some cases many years later. *Unstable Images* pursues the now familiar strategy of postcolonial studies by examining these texts for signs of the discursive framing of the native “other” in opposition to the Western “self,” not only through the play of stereotypes but secreted within descriptions of landscapes, encounters, bodies, spatial arrangements and mundane activities. Clay argues that the images of natives produced in such writings are not merely or, in some cases, mainly “colonial exercises of hegemonic control” (p. 15). Drawing upon Roy Wagner’s *The Invention of Culture* (1975/1980), she sees such images as creations that emerge out of a tension between conventional understandings and the challenges experienced by the writers in the context of intercultural encounters which form a kind of “resistance.” A rounded understanding of colonial discourses, then, requires close attention to the writer’s actual experience as much as the expectations of his or her audience. The texts provide glimpses of “past interactions and practices” and, through them, evidence of indigenous push back against colonialist assumptions (p. 18).
At least, I think that’s what Clay is saying. The Introduction ranges widely through the postcolonial literature as well as anthropological writings on colonialism and cultural change. While interesting, the discussion never quite settles on a clear description of Clay’s own assumptions and strategy.

Those not fond of postcolonial theorizing will turn with some relief to the substantive chapters of the study which, while not entirely free of jargon, focus on the writers’ words and on the fascinating early contact and colonial periods in New Ireland’s history. The sequence of the authors’ residence in the region, if not always the texts, parallels that of successive colonial regimes. Chapter 1 concerns the writings and the person of the Reverend George Brown who pioneered the Methodist mission to New Guinea in 1875 at the beginning of a distinguished career as a self-taught natural scientist, ethnologist, artifact collector and administrator. Perhaps because so much has been written about this famous missionary, Clay gives a cursory treatment of local history, dwelling mostly on two texts, an autobiography (1908) and Brown’s ethological magnum opus, *Melanesians and Polynesians* (1910). Chapter 2 moves into the German period, dealing more with the actual experiences of Methodist missionaries during a period of consolidation, as revealed by correspondence, reports and unpublished autobiographies of two missionaries who, unlike Brown, actually lived in New Ireland: George Pearson and D. Thomas Reddin. The next chapter takes the story into the Australian occupation, with an intimate focus on the routine activities of a district missionary, Ira Mann, as recorded in his daily journal. Chapter 4 makes perhaps the most original contribution. Moving into the Mandate period, Clay examines how Malinowskian functionalism encouraged starkly opposed assessments of the cultural health of indigenous New Ireland societies. In Lesu, Hortense Powdermaker found a fully functioning traditional society scarcely touched by colonial agencies. Yet, to the north and
the south, William C. Groves and the Methodist Gilbert Platten declared societies to be in an advanced state of breakdown, advocating a shift in educational strategies to restore them to functional balance. The final two chapters concern colonial representations of exchanges with New Ireland peoples and the long term missionary impact upon the islanders.

Clay’s commentaries on the texts and the history of missionary and anthropological interventions in New Ireland are for the most part interesting, insightful and convincing. Taken as a whole, however, *Unstable Images* suffers from several flaws in conception and execution. First, Clay does not explain why she has selected these particular texts as opposed to a broader sampling. The concentration upon Methodist missionaries allows her to review the early history and impact of the mission to New Ireland, devoting a whole chapter specifically to the subject. However, the Introduction gives no indication of this theme; instead, she writes more broadly of “colonial discourses.” Second, although texts are identified as the main subject of the study, Clay provides few details on their structure and contents, instead commenting on those passages that interest her. Her comments are interesting, but without more information on the texts her interpretations sometimes seem arbitrary and heavy-handed. Finally, although Clay is mainly interested in the ways experiences influenced colonial perceptions, she periodically uses the same texts to comment on the actual historical impact of colonists, thus conflating two different types of analysis. In Chapter 6, for instance, she draws upon her fieldwork in 1970-71 and 1979-80 to assess the impact of the first 60 years of missionary *representations* (that is, between 1875 and 1935) of indigenous ideas and practices. The question of whether this handful of texts can be taken as representative of how missionaries actually thought and acted (let alone the role of islander teachers, who were the primary evangelists) is barely considered. The question of how
the islanders may have been exposed to or internalized such representations receives even less attention.

Despite these problems, *Unstable Images* is well worth careful study as an experimental attempt at examining the “margins” of colonial texts, to use Bronwen Douglas’ useful phrase (p. 18): simultaneously revealing colonialist assumptions and the faint imprints of indigenous agency.