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REVISING THE VANQUISHED:

Indigenous Perspectives on Colonial Encounters

By Rebecca Weaver-Hightower

ABSTRACT

*This essay examines how and why two works of postcolonial literature (*Master of the Ghost Dreaming *by the Aboriginal Australian writer Narogin Mudrooroo and* Indigo: Mapping the Waters *by the British writer Marina Warner) and two films (Werner Herzog's 1973 German classic* Aguirre: The Wrath of God *and the 1986 Australian Broadcasting Corporation film* Babakiueria*) invite readers to re-imagine colonial contact from the perspective of indigenous Australian and Caribbean people. The essay juxtaposes these particular texts in order to analyze different narrative techniques—cinematic and literary, fictional and somewhat documentary, serious and humorous—and different colonial textual targets—letters, reports, diaries, and ethnographies. Looking at this range of techniques and topics allows us to speculate on the intent and efficacy of these revisionary texts and to explore how they use the narrative point of view to metaphorically shift political perspective. This potentially greater understanding of imperial history and historicity can be an important catalyst of movements toward social progress in postcolonial and neocolonial states. But, as the essay shows,* Babakiueria *warns that reader/viewers must also be wary of this desire to know the Other, which can, if focused in the wrong direction, reinforce "orientalism" and enable a culturally paralyzing complacency.*

In the summer of 2003, Australian television played a provocative commercial set apparently in the Australian or New Guinean bush.[1] The commercial's sparse desert setting at first holds only two white men, one fat, one thin; both dressed in khaki shorts, shirts, and safari hats walking forward into the bush setting, the camera to their backs, moving with them. Then two men of color, perhaps native Papua New Guineans, carrying sticks and dressed in spare loincloths, trot onto screen from the left. A second-long shot of each set

of men simulates their thorough inspection of each other, interrupted when the fat white man nudges the thin one, who raises his camera to aim at the indigenous men. In response, the indigenous men quickly turn away and hide their faces, crying out in language subtitled in English, "No, no don't!" As the camera shifts behind them, so that viewers see their faces, but the white men do not, the indigenous men explain: "That's not Olympus digital. It hasn't got prescription optics. We'll look rubbish." Not understanding the indigenous men's speech and stunned by their gestures of refusal, the thin white man slowly lowers his camera. The fat white man nods, a look of understanding crossing his face, and explains in a thick Australian accent "Hnh. It's the camera. Taking a picture takes their spirit away." The advertisement ends with an image of the Olympus camera clicking and whirring and the clever pronouncement: "Using the wrong equipment is an insult."

The humor of the commercial's moment of misrecognition comes from its ironic rewriting of what could be, without the subtitles, a typical moment of colonialist encounter.[2] Based on common-knowledge folklore about indigenous culture, the white men assume that the indigenous men refuse to let their picture be taken because of a misunderstanding of technology. But the viewer knows from the indigenous men's comments that these men, dressed in loincloths and presented as native to the bush, are, in fact, *more* technologically savvy than the white men; they reject having their picture taken because the camera is inferior. It is not the "native" but the arrogant, unsophisticated white men, who are, so to speak, the butt of the joke. By providing subtitles of the indigenous men's speech, the commercial invites viewers to contrast this version of colonialist encounter, where the indigenous people are more technologically sophisticated, with traditional versions of such a moment that depict indigenous people misunderstanding technology. By providing insight into the perspective of the indigene, the subtitles change the viewer's response to that typical scene of cultural misrecognition.

This essay will examine other texts that similarly rewrite moments of colonialist encounter, texts that offer audiences alternatives to traditional views they might encounter in history books. This essay will examine how and why two works of postcolonial literature—*Master of the Ghost Dreaming* by the Aboriginal Australian writer Narogin Mudrooroo and *Indigo: Mapping the Waters* by the British writer Marina Warner—and two films—Werner Herzog's German classic *Aguirre: The Wrath of God* and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's film *Babakiueria*—invite readers to re-imagine colonial contact from the perspective of indigenous Australian and Caribbean people.

These four texts are not the only ones that replay moments of colonialist encounter, but I want to examine these particular texts together in order to analyze different narrative techniques—cinematic and literary, fictional and somewhat documentary, serious and humorous—and different colonial textual targets—letters, reports, diaries, and ethnographies. Looking at this range of techniques and topics allows us to speculate on the intent and efficacy of these revisionary texts and to explore how they use narrative point of view metaphorically to shift political perspective just as the camera in the Olympus commercial literally shifts its viewers' perspectives, from being (literally and cognitively) aligned with the white men to being aligned with the black.

Let us return to the Olympus camera commercial for a moment to consider how it positions its viewer, to whom, we assume, it wants to sell a camera. There are two cameras in this advertisement: the camera we are meant to buy and the camera filming the commercial that is meant to inflect our feelings and allegiances. The camera's movement works to shift viewers' identification from that of the white Australians at the commercial's beginning to that of the indigenous people at its end. The subtitles, as well, are crucial to this shift in identification, for without them, most viewers who, based on Australian demographics, would be white, would not understand the indigenous men's speech any more than the white men in the commercial did and might reach the same misunderstanding. But with the subtitles, viewers are allowed to join the indigenous men in laughing at the ignorant white tourists. The subtitles assure us that we, if only for a moment, are also more culturally sophisticated than the ruddy-faced, working-class, marked by their accents, Australians. This fantasy is presumably meant to flatter us into buying that expensive camera. Though some viewers might be offended, the commercial counts on this shift in perspective to make the ad funny and influence viewers to buy the camera. Buying the Olympus camera, it seems, will mark our difference from these men, who weren't discriminating enough as consumers to buy it.

Also significant to the commercial's appeal is the fantasy of insight and access that it promises viewers. In this post-modern Western tourist fantasy, viewers (Olympus cameras hanging around necks) would find indigenous people who would be happy to have their picture taken, perhaps even to invite viewers into their homes and culture. Owning the camera earns acceptance. Or perhaps, taking the commercial's fantasy one step further, viewers are meant to imagine that the Olympus camera will enable the cultural insight temporarily granted to us in the commercial, that as well as being accepted

into the indigenous community they will be able to understand it, just as in the commercial they could temporarily understand the men's speech. Through the lens of that superior camera, indigenous language and culture will become scrutable, able to be consumed, taken home and displayed, as easily as the photograph of the indigenous men they would no doubt be allowed to take.

By using subtitles in this way, the advertisement makers were presuming a fantasy of being able to know the Other, a desire for privileged insight gained through access to private speech acts. The four texts under discussion in this essay likewise work upon that assumed desire, though I will argue they do so for ideological purposes—not to sell goods (other than the books themselves) but to sell a progressive ideology and promote understanding. This essay will first analyze how the two films and two novels present narratives otherwise largely missing from the historical record—that is of colonialist encounter from the perspective of the colonized—to help descendants of colonizers and colonized better understand the complicated systems and methods of resistance to colonialism. The essay then examines how these texts also depict the generation of texts often taken for "historical documents," such as diaries, letters, and reports, in such a way as to raise questions about the accuracy of the data we do have and to undermine harmful contemporary stereotypes stemming from the dominant historical record. This potentially greater understanding of imperial history and historicity can be an important catalyst of movements toward social progress in postcolonial and neocolonial states. But, as I will show, *Babakiueria* warns that reader/viewers must also be wary of this desire to know the Other, which can, if focused in the wrong direction, reinforce "orientalism" and enable a culturally paralyzing complacency.

SEALING GAPS IN IMPERIAL HISTORY

We can better understand why authors and filmmakers would rewrite moments of imperial conquest to provide readers with alternative views of oft-represented colonial *historical* events by reading these texts alongside those written to revise canonical *literary* moments. As postcolonial scholarship of the last thirty years has amply demonstrated, one important method of resistance postcolonial authors employ globally involves rewriting canonical texts to battle their effectiveness as agents of colonialist ideology.[3] Such rewritings of early texts, which change key elements of the original story, provide contemporary readers with alternate narratives against which to

contextualize the original. Contemporary readings of *Jane Eyre* and any compassion for the British colonialist Rochester, for instance, are inescapably inflected by awareness of Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* and sympathy with her Creole heroine. Similarly, perceptions of *Robinson Crusoe* are filtered by familiarity with J. M. Coetzee's *Foe* and other postcolonial treatments and his portrayal of Crusoe and Foe as exploiters of his fictional author, Susan Barton. A handful of postcolonial texts similarly labor to rewrite canonical "historical" accounts of moments of conquest, such as those found in the diaries of Christopher Columbus and James Cook. The four works under discussion, *Master of the Ghost Dreaming*, *Indigo: Mapping the Waters*, *Aguirre: The Wrath of God* and *Babakiueria,* all aim to "write back" to the early-modern historical canon by including in their narratives moments of colonial encounter presented from an indigenous point of view, moments which often give a picture of indigenous resistance and colonizer duplicity.

Because so few original accounts of early colonialist encounters produced by indigenous Australians or Amerindians survive—a sad fact resulting from a scarcity of writing systems for indigenous languages combined with the systematic destruction of property, including manuscripts and records, which followed colonization—these fictional texts play an important role in filling in the psychological need for that lost side of the colonial story.[4] As part of imagining these "historical" documents, all four of the texts under discussion implicitly comment on the tragedy that so few indigenous Australian and Caribbean people have survived the violence of empire: after the carnage of colonialism, only one percent of Australia's population of nineteen million is indigenous, and very few indigenous Caribbean people remain at all. Though accounts alternative to "official" history do not necessarily have to originate with indigenous people, the small number of indigenous voices makes recovery of historical accounts to compete with the vision of the victors even more elusive.

In contrast, early-modern historical archives teem with narratives of conquest written by the European conquerors—which Steven Greenblatt calls "the vision of the victors" (vii)—including diaries and letters, such as those by Columbus, Cook, Cortez, and Dampier, and ethnographic and scientific reports, like those of Darwin, Malinowski, and Burton. The four texts discussed here all use literary and cinematic narrative to engage those earlier manuscripts and historical events by providing an alternate history—what Nathan Wachtel calls "the vision of the vanquished" (qtd. in Greeenblatt viii), thus giving the conquered a face, a name, and, finally, a voice equal to the

European colonialists'. The two films and two novels under discussion supply an imagined but alternative, insider's view of events that contemporary readers lack. By presenting events through the eyes of the vanquished, the texts give readers a parallax view for reading the "historical" accounts. Thus, like the Olympus commercial, these four texts offer their largely white audiences insight into the situation of the colonized Other they would otherwise lack, an insight that could provoke a valuable reconsidering of historical events as commonly recorded in legend and lore.

Marina Warner's *Indigo: Mapping the Waters,* as a loose retelling of the story of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, writes back to both the literary and historical canons.[5] Warner uses names of Shakespeare's characters to show how, through misrecognition and misrepresentation, Shakespeare's story and its familiar characters could have originated from distortions, now passing into colonialist lore. Warner recasts Shakespeare's tale both in a fifteenth-century revision of the colonial first encounter and in a twentieth-century frame story, both timelines parodying and interrupting Shakespeare's original.[6] In the fifteenth-century timeline, which will be the focus of this essay, Warner's Sycorax is an old indigenous medicine woman and dyer of indigo cloth who resists a group of English explorers led by the adventurer, Kit Everard. The explorers eventually kill Sycorax and bury her underneath a tree, which her spirit supposedly haunts. Shakespeare's wood sprite, Ariel, in *Indigo* becomes Ariel, Sycorax's adopted Arawak daughter, whose beauty catches the eye of Kit Everard and who, after several sexual encounters, has his son. In *Indigo,* Shakespeare's mischievous monster, Caliban, becomes the African man who the Caribbean villagers call "Caliban" but whom Sycorax calls "Dule" meaning "grief," reflecting his birth as an orphan from the sea.[7]

Through her rewriting of Shakespeare's story, Warner creates an allegory for Caribbean history by showing how Sycorax, like contemporary Caribbean cultures, assembles an adoptive family from the violence of empire and by showing readers a moment none of us witnessed first-hand and few have encountered in texts. Warner provides the version of conquest only implied by Columbus's diary, a version where the reader, through the eyes of indigenous Caribbean people, sees the white-sailed ships come ashore and meets the foreign pink-skinned intruders, only to, like the characters, become more and more disillusioned by the English settlers' broken promises and duplicitous actions. In Warner's version, the indigenous islanders are welcoming and cooperative until bludgeoned and cheated out of their goodwill, at which point they resist, battling the colonial marauders with magic and spear.

Warner complicates the colonial rape trope by having Ariel use her sexuality as a form of resistance and control. In Warner's version, it is Ariel who chooses whether or not to accept the European sexually, who desires her and who hates himself for his desire and his weakness. As Warner describes, "Ariel tasted a certain triumph in his weakness; she found cruelty a reward . . . she began to enjoy denying him, then permitting him again" (167). Sexuality in this case becomes a weapon for the indigenous woman, not for the conqueror. By showing indigenous people as actively resistant to colonization, the text helps to undermine stereotypes of simple victimhood ensuing from those original historical narratives of conquest. Narrating that event of colonial encounter from the perspective of an indigenous Caribbean community, *Indigo* taps into fantasies for insight into colonized culture, thereby creating an experience that could, for receptive readers, change responses to other texts of colonial invasion.

Like *Indigo,* Werner Herzog's film *Aguirre: The Wrath of God* provides a view of colonialist encounter in South America, one that is filled with violence and murder in the name of religious conversion and material gain. The film is based upon the real-life voyage of the Spanish explorer, Lope Aguirre, seasoned veteran of South American colonial campaigns and megalomaniac. History books tell us that in 1559, Aguirre and a group of Spanish soldiers and native slaves traveled down the Amazon under the leadership of Pedro de Ursua in search of El Dorado, the mythical land of gold. After leading a coup against Ursua and declaring himself and his compatriots independent of Spain, Aguirre completed his voyage down the Amazon, then went on to capture the Caribbean island of Margarita, before being killed in an attempted conquest of Venezuela.[8] The film makes some significant changes to this sequence of events, concluding not with Aguirre's capture of Margarita and death but with Aguirre drifting alone in mad starvation on his Amazonian raft, his men already killed by Indians or internal conflict. Though otherwise loosely retelling the "official" story of Aguirre's insurrection and colonial conquest as taken from questionable first-hand accounts gathered from the survivors among Aguirre's men, Herzog's version shows colonial exploration not as heroic or civilizing but as cruel, exploitative, and greed-driven.

Moreover, *Aguirre* presents an alternative view of events of colonialist encounter by including indigenous voices not present in the original texts. As Greg Waller observes in his study, "*Aguirre: the Wrath of God*; History, Theater, and the Camera," the film adds several colonized characters—including an African slave and two Amerindian servants—not present on the

historical voyage "to create the sense that *Aguirre* is a microcosm of New Spain in the sixteenth century" (57). The film, Waller notes, gives each colonized character a moment to narrate his view of events that—because the Aguirre voyage provides a microcosm of empire—comments on colonialism in general. The most powerful of these moments comes when the Amerindian slave, Balthasar, explains his tragic history to Aguirre's seemingly disinterested daughter: "Earthquakes, disease and floods have visited my people but what the Spaniards did to us," he explains, "is a [sic] far, far worse." He continues explaining his own history, head turned away, looking neither at Aguirre's daughter nor the camera as he addresses both: "They named me Balthasar, but my real name is Runo Rimac . . . It means: 'The one who speaks.' I was a prince in this land. All others had to bow to me. No one was allowed to look directly at me. Now like my people I'm in chains, and I must bow my head. They've robbed us of everything. I am powerless against them." This scene is revisionary in its voicing of the Amerindian slave's perspective of colonization, one of despair and loss. Balthasar's oration is revisionary, as well, in its reiteration of the reality that in the Amazonian jungle the Spaniards are helpless against the landscape and the indigenous people. Balthasar, in fact, ends his brief monologue by expressing ironic sympathy for Aguirre's sheltered daughter, since, as he explains, "there is no way out of this jungle," a theme echoed throughout the film in shot after shot of the Spaniards bogged down in mud, caught in a whirlpool, or picked off by arrows from tribesmen on shore. This highlighting of the Spanish conquistadors as powerless and the Amerindians as successfully resistant is another way the film shows an alternative to stories of Spanish conquering unresisting Amerindians. Like the subtitles in the Olympus commercial, *Aguirre's* moments of indigenous self-explanation offer viewers insight into alternate perspectives on colonization, which could inflect viewer response to traditional colonial texts.

Set in colonized Australia, Mudrooroo's *Master of the Ghost Dreaming* presents a similarly alternative version of colonialist encounter. Unlike *Indigo* and *Aguirre*, however, Mudrooroo's story of colonialist encounter employs humor to present a vision of the vanquished, and like the Olympus commercial, to encourage contemporary readers to identify with the savvy Aboriginal characters instead of the white settlers. *Master of the Ghost Dreaming* focuses on a community of Aboriginal people who have been displaced from their lands by white colonists and moved into a mission settlement on a depleted island. The mission is run by three white English people: the well-meaning but ineffective commandant, whom the Aboriginal people ironically call "Fada"

(father); his laudanum-addicted, shrewish wife, "Mada" (mother); and their weak but well-intentioned son, "Sonny." This story indexes many accounts or reports of similar mission settlements, which at one time were common in Australia, but Mudrooroo writes his tale to give an alternative view of events, providing readers with an ironic insight into the truth behind events in the settlement.[9] Jangamattuk, the Aboriginal community's old spirit leader, and his young, beautiful wife Ludgee, in fact, allow Fada and Mada to believe they command the mission settlement, while Jangamattuk studies them to try to capture the secret of the good health of the white people so he may counteract the declining health of so many Aboriginal people. Jangamattuk and his community believe the white people are ghosts of Aboriginal people, white with pain, who in their unhappiness are ruining the balance of the world. In Mudrooroo's account, pathogens and bad luck, not the prowess of the victors, vanquished the smart and compassionate Aboriginal people. Ultimately, the Aboriginal community is able to trick the deluded Fada into fleeing the island mission, leaving behind a fully-equipped ship the Aboriginals use to sail away to self-determination.

By radically re-articulating moments of colonialist encounter, all three texts discussed thus far provide their audiences with the opportunity to reconceptualize indigenous people as resistant to colonial violence, as active agents, not simply as the nascent victims of white colonial manifest destiny, a stereotype that lives on in perceptions of minorities as childlike and lazy. Like *Indigo*, *Master of the Ghost Dreaming* shows indigenous people as empowered by mystic and religious rites—for example, the Aboriginal dreaming of Jangamattuk—to demonstrate methods of successful resistance not addressed in conquest narratives or recognized by the conquerors.[10] As Knudson notes in "Clocktime and Dreamtime," the novel depicts its Aboriginal characters as "resilient, dynamic, and capable of productive transformations through the politics of the Dreaming" (113). With his dreaming companion, Jangamuttuk can see into the souls and influence the behavior of the white ghosts, and though he is not ultimately successful in turning the tide of colonization, he wins small-scale battles and offers significant resistance.

Like *Master of the Ghost Dreaming,* the 1986 Australian Broadcasting Corporation film *Babakiueria*—the title a jibe at "barbecue area" spoken in an Australian accent—also uses humor to rewrite moments of colonialist encounter. The film begins with a scene of first contact, with Aboriginal explorers colonizing a land populated by white people, who, when first "discovered," are barbecuing. When the Aboriginal conquerors ask the white "natives" what they call

the land, the whites answer that they call it "barbecue area," which the Aboriginal conquerors assume to be the name of the entire land they are there to colonize. "Nice native name," they say. "Colorful. I like it." Like *Master of the Ghost Dreaming*, *Babakiueria's* humorous rewriting of colonialist encounter, invites viewers to participate in its reversal of events and to find humor in the insight into white Australian culture one gains by seeing it through the eyes of an Other. Unlike Mudrooroo's novel, though, the film asks white viewers to imagine themselves as members of an oppressed race, not simply to sympathize with oppressed members of an Other race. The majority of *Babakiueria*'s revision, however, is set in the 1980s in a faux ethnographic documentary showing the contemporary results of that role reversal, pointing out the fallacies of colonial stereotypes, and demonstrating how institutional poverty, racism, and power inequalities stem from that original contact.

The mockumentary is narrated and supposedly created by the Aboriginal woman, Duranga Manika, played by Michelle Torres, who begins by explaining the moment of colonial contact that the film has just re-enacted: "When the first black settlers arrived in Babakiueria, they found the native population sheltering around primitive open fires, attempting to cook their food with crude implements, and even seeming to take pleasure in burning the meat." Duranga breaks to smile at a white couple cooking over a grill. "I've always been fascinated by white people," she remarks. "The evidence of their culture is all around us: their art" (she points to graffiti painted on a rock), "their industry" (she points to an abandoned car), "their way of life" (she gestures to an overflowing trashcan). This scene prompts both humor and pain, as Duranga's appraisal of white culture, viewers realize, is not so much misunderstanding as recognition, since graffiti, overflowing trashcans, and abandoned cars are byproducts of industrialization and monuments of urban decay.

Babakiueria offers insight for white viewers both into what it must have been like to be the indigenous people on that shore, watching colonizers appear and being so profoundly misunderstood by them, and into what it must be like to be their descendants. As the opening scene of colonial contact changes to a modern city street, Duranga asks "But what do we think of white people?" and queries an Aboriginal man getting out of his car, "Excuse me sir. What do you think about white people?" The man answers: "White people? You've got to be joking." Another besuited Aboriginal man in an office building lobby answers, "Oh I don't know. I've never met one." An Aboriginal woman answers: "I like their music. They can't dance unfortunately, but I love their music." As Wagwan, the Minister for White Affairs, next remarks:

"They're a developing people. They're starting to take an interest in the world around them. And this is a good sign." *Babakiueria's* role reversal is meant, one would imagine, to shock its white audience into increased insight into the self-absorption and potential cruelties of post-colonial white culture. The film thus employs a desire to know more about the Other in a slightly different way; instead of giving access to hidden speech, like the Olympic advertisement's subtitles, *Babakiueria* puts viewers momentarily into the position of the contemporary descendants of colonized people—minority, disempowered, misunderstood—and uses humor to perhaps make viewers more receptive to this increased self-knowledge.

Writing back to the historical record can mean more than just providing the "vision of the vanquished" that is currently missing. All four of the texts also "write back" by challenging the "official" versions of history that scholars and contemporary readers have to work from; they show the dominant historical discourse as flawed in motive, accuracy, and composition, giving viewers/readers cause to rethink the contemporary stereotypes and race relations resulting from those narratives. In *Babakiueria,* for instance, the film itself, as a mock documentary, attests to the many moments of individual cultural misunderstanding that can be entered into "official" history. For contemporary audiences, documentaries, with their guise of historical accuracy and impartiality, likely seem more credible and are definitely more frequently encountered vehicles of historical narrative than history books. Thus, the film's challenging of documentary accuracy is especially compelling. One of the film's most notable and ironic scenes of cultural misunderstanding occurs in an Australian gambling establishment, which Duranga confuses for a place of religious worship.

The scene begins with Duranga giving money to a cashier for a betting slip. She then turns to the camera and explains about the betting office: "Their austere design, their complete lack of decoration or adornment, gives no clue to the huge sums of money which pass through these doors everyday, as the followers of this religion exchange their donations for these small prayer tokens" (she holds up the betting slip to the camera). While at first humorously ludicrous, Duranga's misrecognition seems more and more understandable as the camera cuts to a group of men looking at their slips while watching pre-race betting information on a television. Duranga continues her address to the camera: "We can see some of the worshippers now as they stand heads bowed in deep reverence, while they listen to the incantations broadcast over the TV set and study the details on their prayer tokens." Cutting to a horse

race beginning, the camera pans between anxious faces fixated on the television, as Duranga explains in a voiceover: "And then they pray. They pray for success, for wealth, for happiness, and they believe that the future course of their lives will be foretold by watching some trained horses run around a large circle." The race ends with the disappointed men tearing up their betting slips and the camera turning back to Duranga, who remarks, "Strange, isn't it, that at the end of the broadcast, we saw many people tear up their tokens and throw them away? But if you thought this action indicated a loss of faith in their religion, you'd be wrong. Many of these people will be back here tomorrow to exchange new donations for new prayer tokens." She ends with an ironic address to the camera and her fellow black Babakiuerians: "What simple faith." The ironic humor of this scene, of course, comes both from its misunderstanding of the event being shown and from the remarkable insight contained in that very misdescription, for the men do behave as if praying to a god through the television, and they do have faith that their lives will be changed based on the outcome of the race. And like a religion, the men will remain faithful practitioners of that ritual regardless of the results of their "prayers." Such a realization is simultaneously humorous and sobering, as is the film's showing of a real-life riot at an Australian football game as an example of its claim for the white culture's natural propensity for violence. By documenting such profound misinterpretations, the film stresses the likelihood that other ethnographic accounts of "native" rites and rituals—far from being neutral technologies of communication—contain similar misreadings that lead to and grow from cultural misunderstanding.

The first three texts I discussed show the inaccurate production of documents in a more historically distant past. In *Indigo*, Warner shows Kit Everard writing letters, both personal and official, reporting his progress to English colonial administrators and to his fiancée in England. In these letters, Kit consistently rewrites events to present the colony as a success, the indigenous people as non-resistant and in need of civilizing, and himself as just and virtuous. After his first violent day of conquest on the island, for instance, Kit admits to himself that in his countering of indigenous resistance "he had truly been godforsaken today . . . and had never before done such violence to anyone," but in the account he writes home to his fiancée, he explains his first days as peaceful. He is building a stockade, he says, "though these measures are not due to necessity, as the people here are glad to be of service to us and treat us with courtesy in which not a little deference is admixed" (152). His letters to his fiancée were not intended as an official account, yet they exemplify

just the type of document contemporary scholars and historians use to reconstruct historical events. Even such intimate and informal accounts, Warner is saying, are untrustworthy and naturally one-sided. In order to piece together a nuanced understanding of history, then, we need alternative views such as the one she provides, and we need to re-think contemporary stereotypes and national narratives of racial destiny that are based on such flawed documents.

Mudrooroo also opens space for questioning the veracity of historical sources through his narration of the creation of Fada's anthropological papers.[11] Though a missionary, Fada aspires to join the Royal Anthropological Society. Throughout the novel, Fada mentally composes ethnographies of his Aboriginal charges—which readers see, by juxtaposing his thoughts with the actual events, are highly inaccurate, even fabricated. For instance, early in the book, Fada witnesses Jangamattuk engaged in a dreamtime ceremony to discern the secret to the "ghosts" or the white people's health. Fada decides to make a charcoal drawing of the scene for the Journal of the Royal Anthropological Society, calling it "Deserted Ceremonial Ground," though he glimpsed the Aboriginal people only as they quickly exited the scene and would have to invent a tableau. As he describes: "The body paintings were of such a degree of intimacy that he might not be able to reproduce them in their entirety, but then over the years he had seen enough of native ceremony and body painting to improvise on the design. He sighed. The missionary and the anthropologist uneasily shared his soul" (18). In another scene, Fada requires Ludgee to pose for him naked with a shell basket, so he can pretend to have caught her unawares in nature. The readers know though that in fact the sketching was really a ruse to rape her, which she artfully avoids. Like Warner, Mudrooroo, by showing the great potential for inaccuracies of the texts we do have, implies the need for texts like his that provide an alternative vision so readers can question mores based on these accounts.

Like the other texts, *Aguirre* calls into question the accuracy of the diaries, letters, and reports upon which the legend of the Spanish conquest is based. As Greg Waller remarks, though Herzog does not reveal his real sources for the story, the text following *Aguirre's* opening title—"The only document to survive from this lost expedition, is the diary of the monk Gaspar de Carvajal"—implies the film is based on the monk's diary. Following that text, a man's voiceover gives the date and begins the narrative, but in truth, Carvajal's diary of this expedition is only Herzog's invention. Moreover, as Waldemer remarks, while setting itself up as an "historical" film, *Aguirre* consistently sabotages its own viewers' belief in the accuracy of that diary as a historical text by placing the

monk's benign descriptions of events in sharp contrast with events as shown on the screen. The film is critical of the monk, who is self-deluding or self-interested enough to take Aguirre's side after the coup against Ursua and who explains his actions with the following logic: "for the sake of Our Lord, the church has always been on the side of the strong."

The veracity of the diary's presentation of events is most sharply questioned in a scene involving two Amerindians who approach the river-bound rafts in a canoe. The Amerindians' speech is only understood by the Indian slave, Balthasar, who then translates the speech for the Spaniards.[12] The diary voiceover introduces the scene: "Twenty-fourth of January. For the first time we saw savages. They seem to be trusting." Through translation, the Amerindians explain that they come in peace and think the Spaniards are "sons of the sun," who prophesy foretold "would come with tubes that made thunder." While the Spanish soldiers are only interested in the gold that the natives wear and in getting directions to El Dorado, the monk seems to be interested in the state of their souls. "Has this savage heard of our Saviour Jesus Christ and of our mission to save their souls?" he asks Balthasar to translate, "Has he understood this Book [the Bible] contains the Word of God?" The Amerindian man, misunderstanding the metaphor, holds the Bible up to his ear and replies through Balthasar that the book does not speak to him. Immediately, the man doubles over, falling dead to the deck, as the camera shows the monk holding a bloody sword, apparently having stabbed the man as part of "converting" him. The final lines of the diary entry are voiced: "It is hard work. These savages are hard to convert. " In light of the violence committed by the monk, these lines seem more than ironic; they seem nefarious, as if the official version of events (conversion) were created to mask the real event (murder and plunder), all of which leads the audience to question the accuracy and neutrality of the official "historical" records and contemporary national narratives born of such suspect accounts.

Though all four texts present alternate versions of colonialist encounters, none downplay the cultural and real violence of that contact or its continuing devastating results on the indigenous communities they chronicle. None of them change the outcome of these acts of empire, nor gloss over the genocidal behaviors, but merely provide readers with alternative first-hand accounts that could have been recorded had history taken a different turn. Through the efforts of such authors to provide a vision of the vanquished, the vanquished gain a face, a name, and, finally, a voice equal to that of the European colonialists. By engaging with colonial events, those novels and others like them could

complicate contemporary perceptions of early modern history in a manner useful for better understanding the ideology behind the texts of conquest and the resistance movements out of which postcolonial revisions emerge.

Yet, as I remarked in this essay's opening, *Babakiueria* asks viewers to take another look at this desire to learn about the Other's perspective and at our desires and abilities to really understand it. By also showing how misunderstanding can extend to fantasies of the ethnographer's position within the community under study, *Babakiueria* asks us to question if it is ever possible to get beyond our own perspective to experience that of another. One of the tactics *Babakiueria* employs to make this point involves showing Duranga's version of her relationship with the Smiths, the white family she observes and lives with for six months. In one instance, Duranga explains that she understands how the Smiths must be feeling after the government takes their daughter to be raised elsewhere.[13] "Parting with a loved one is never easy," Duranga explains, "I said good-bye to my mother recently when she went on holiday. So I know how they feel." Her shallow misunderstanding of the Smiths' feelings of loss and their feelings toward her are highlighted when she asks them if they "see this [their daughter's removal] as the price of progress," to which they answer that they do, belying the anguished looks on their faces and their obvious anger and discomfort with her. In a later scene, Duranga explains her emotional reaction to seeing the Smiths forced by the government to move from their house to the outback: "After many months of living with these people, sharing their meager food, their humble dwelling, I felt I became one of the family. As I watched them drive away, I felt a real sense of missing them. I'm sure they felt that way about me." The irony of this last statement comes from Duranga's arrogant assumption of intimacy and affection with the family, her presumption of privilege and insight. If Duranga is so self-deluded and insensitive, the film seems to ask, how could viewers trust any other point of her documentary if it is based on a supposed "insider's" knowledge of another culture? The film, while making use of desires to understand the point of the view of the colonized, also asks us to be wary of that desire. Could we ever, it seems to ask, know anything beyond the fantasy we want to see reflected back at ourselves? Are we all like Duranga or the white men in the Olympus commercial? Despite its encouragement of healthy self-skepticism, *Babakiueria* does teach its viewers a lesson through its retelling of those stories. There are no subtitles in the world outside of the Olympus commercial; we need to do more than question the accounts to which we have access, more than read between the lines. We must seek and create other tools to help

us imagine how those gaps in the historical record could have been filled and to upset the notion that victory and the power to record history went to the strongest and smartest.

NOTES

1. Though the commercial was made by the Sydney advertising company Saatchi & Saatchi and shown to an Australian audience, the Australian media company, Portfolio and Reel, speculates that it might have been shot in South Africa.

2. By using the term "colonialist encounter" I want to include both moments of first contact between an indigenous people and their colonizers and later encounters when both are aware of the other, since all encounters in what Pratt calls "the contact zone" can be overdetermined with symbolic, emotional, and political meaning.

3. As noted by Newman, Ashcroft, Tiffin, and Griffiths and other postcolonial critics, "writing back" is a widely employed tool of postcolonial resistance.

4. A few texts do survive describing conquest from the perspective of the colonized, some of which are collected in León Portilla and Brotherson. I am grateful to Peter Hulme for pointing out these texts to me.

5. See Todd for analysis of how *Indigo* can be read as both rewriting "English literary as well as cultural history" (104).

6. See De la Concha's explanation of how Warner complicates Shakespeare's characters in her parallel narrative timelines.

7. Dule/Caliban washed ashore in the womb of his drowned mother, a slave thrown overboard in the middle passage, to be delivered by Sycorax from his mother's corpse and adopted until he grows into an honorable and fierce warrior who leads a narrowly failed rebellion against the English colonists.

8. Lewis and Waldemer discuss how this historical event has been adapted for fiction and film. As they note, all these treatments stem from the same "historical" sources, though as Waldemer explains, these first-hand accounts are unreliable since their authors were trying to construct narratives that would paint themselves favorably in light of their treasonous behaviors.

9. See Knudson and Lane for Mudrooroo's rewriting of the colonial Australian mission experience.

10. Several essays, including McCreddin's and Fee's, remark on how Mudrooroo's political project in writing *Master of the Ghost Dreaming* parallels Jangamuttuk's.

11. Several critics point out that Mudrooroo also challenges historical records and colonial literature by supplanting it with Aboriginal texts and narrative techniques. Knudson remarks that both Mudrooroo and Jangamattuk resist colonialist writing: "Myth swallows history, Clocktime is subsumed into Dreamtime, and European letter and alphabet relinquish their epistemological grip on Aboriginal word and image" ("Mudrooroo's Encounters with the Missionaries" 173). Devins likewise remarks on Mudrooroo's use of language as resistant, specifically on his juxtaposition of pidgin and standard Englishes: "Overall, Mudrooroo's association of the Dreaming with utopian languages. Pidgin represents an Aboriginal alternative to Standard English in the

same manner that the Dreaming represents an Aboriginal alternative to a dystopian European world-view" ("Mudrooroo's Use of Utopian and Dystopian Genre Conventions" 23).

12. The film is actually in German (not Spanish) and then subtitled in English for English-speaking audiences. Knepper's discusses the intricacies of the film's doubled translations.

13. The film is here reversing the situation of what has been called the "stolen generation," as described in the Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's 1997 report, *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families*. For generations the government systematically enacted an assimilationist policy, taking Aboriginal children (especially light-skinned or mixed race children) from their homes to be raised in missions or orphanages. For an excellent novelized treatment of this situation, see Pilkington.

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