

## Culture



**David TRIGGER, *Whitefella Comin': Aboriginal Responses to Colonialism in Northern Australia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992. 250 pages, \$45.00 (cloth)**

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[See table of contents](#)

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lesquels repose le projet exotique et de les affronter à la manière, par exemple, de Abigail Solomon-Godeau dans sa brillante déconstruction de l'oeuvre de Gauguin ("*Gone Native*", *Art in America*, July 1989). Ajoutons que Susan Stewart nous avait déjà présenté une critique de l'ensemble du phénomène de la nostalgie (ce sentiment si spécifiquement bourgeois occidental) beaucoup plus politique et beaucoup plus fine intellectuellement que celle que nous offre Bongie (voir *On Longing*, The John Hopkins University Press, 1984). En résumé, peut-être vaudrait-il mieux oublier *Exotic Memories*.

David TRIGGER, *Whitefella Comin': Aboriginal Responses to Colonialism in Northern Australia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992. 250 pages, \$45.00 (cloth).

By Noel Dyck  
Simon Fraser University

David Trigger's study of a mission settlement for Aboriginal people in northern Queensland provides not only a nicely sketched account of the historical development of this peculiar type of community but also a perceptive analysis of resistance and accommodation by Aboriginal peoples to their White tutors. The community, Doomadgee, was established in the 1930s by an Australian fundamentalist Christian sect with the cooperation of the Department of Native Affairs. In subsequent years the mission authorities assumed a major role in regulating the secular lives of Aboriginal people on behalf of the Queensland government. When Trigger first visited Doomadgee in the late 1970s he discovered a community which was geographically, politically, and culturally divided into the domains of 'Whitefella' and 'Blackfella.'

Entering a situation within which it was virtually impossible to occupy a middle ground, Trigger opted to work within the Aboriginal section of the community. Recognizing the structurally-based power exercised by mission and government officials over the members of the village, he focused upon the extent to which Aboriginal consciousness and practices have been constrained and informed by political and economic structures of Australian tutelage. The quotation included in the title of the book is a

statement heard often by Trigger during fieldwork. "Rarely," he notes in the preface to the book, "was it said with malice, and on occasions the tone was affectionate" (p.x). By including this phrase in the title he seeks to establish the image of the White presence in this settlement as "simultaneously peripheral to much of Aboriginal social life yet also highly influential over certain aspects of Aboriginal action and consciousness."

The first section of the book, which traces the development of the area and the mission, provides a useful summary of the evolution of relations between Aboriginal peoples and Euro-Australians. In the wake of an initial period of sustained frontier conflict and violence between Aboriginal peoples and Whites (identified by the former as the "Wild Time"), Aboriginal peoples were brought under the control of the state by a combination of punitive action, distribution of rations, and the creation of settlements. Government also regulated Aboriginal workers' extensive involvement in the pastoralist industry under the Australian system of nationally determined wage rates; until the 1960s Aboriginal peoples were entitled to only a fraction of the wages paid White workers. By the time of Trigger's field research this source of Aboriginal employment was much diminished and the dependence of the people of Doomadgee upon state assistance (administered in this particular community by religious personnel) was solidly entrenched. Within a mission community religious adherence is socio-economically salient. For instance, Trigger calculates that those Aboriginal people who attended Christian meetings regularly were over four times as likely to be living in the newer houses as were those not attending regularly.

In the second part of the book Trigger pursues two related analytical questions: have Aboriginal people been dominated "hegemonically as well as structurally? Does fine-grained ethnographic study reveal everyday forms of resistance similar to those that have been identified as part of cultures of resistance in the lives of various subordinate peoples?" (p.218). His treatment of these concerns makes this book one which should be read by not only those who are specifically interested in relations between minority indigenous or 'fourth world' peoples and nation-states but also those who are curious about how ethnographic analysis can be conducted in order to explicate relations of tutelage and resistance, whatever the context.

The strength of this ethnography lies in the manner in which it moves between and seeks to link past and present, political economy and culture, public interaction and individual belief, not to mention ethnographic description and theoretically informed analysis. Trigger is careful to identify and include himself as a temporary subject within the community and the relationships he seeks to understand. Nevertheless, he strives throughout the book to provide assessments which make telling use of his negotiated access to the 'Blackfella' domain without reducing either the principals or the practices of the other domain to rhetorical cyphers. In the end Trigger concludes that a simple notion of hegemony does not suffice to summarize the complexly intertwined nature of resistance and accommodation within Aboriginal-White relations in this remote mission settlement. His analysis also demonstrates how an ethnographic study of the processes of everyday life might elucidate cultures of resistance and the dynamics of tutelage in settings far removed from Doomadgee.

Partha MITTER, *Much Maligned Monsters: A History of European Reactions to Indian Art*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992 (with a new Preface); 351 pages. \$17.95 (paper).

By Michael M. Ames  
University of British Columbia

How a society comes to terms with itself in the process of coming to terms with others has never been better documented than in the case of Western civilization. Inspired by a proselytizing religion, imperialism, rationalism, and the spirit of capitalism, Westerners for centuries ventured forth into the unknown, and over the centuries gradually if reluctantly discovered themselves. Mitter's discussion of how European interpretations of the art and architecture of India reflected changing European intellectual fashions, and therefore necessarily failed to properly understand those alien arts, adds significantly to this process of self-discovery.

In his Preface to this paperback edition (the book was first published in 1977), Mitter locates his own work within the currently fashionable post-modern critique of the monolithic claims of Western scholarship. "As I see it," he announces (p. xiii), "my own contribution has been not only to trace misrepresentations of Hindu art throughout history but, more importantly, to challenge the validity of applying Western classical norms for appreciating ancient Indian art." Following a meticulously documented and richly illustrated accounting of a succession of distorted views from the thirteenth century to the beginnings of the twentieth, each carefully connected to its historic antecedents and prevailing intellectual tradition, the author concludes (p. 286) that he has attempted "to draw aside the veil of misinterpretations so that the Indian gods may reveal their true beauty to us."

Is then the history of Western social thought mostly a succession of more or less ethnocentric and historically specific points of view, as Mitter suggests, or is there some evolutionary development, away from gross ignorance and distortions if not towards some form of truth? Mitter is reluctant to admit to the latter possibility. Even the more insightful works of his most recent examples, E.B. Havell (publishing in 1908 and 1911) and Ananda Coomaraswamy (1908, 1920, 1934), who benefited from a massing of knowledge about Indian art inconceivable before, could not transcend their European-inspired biases.

There are two problems with Mitter's critique. First, contrary to the relativism he asserts, he also documents a definite trend over the centuries towards increasingly accurate descriptions of Indian art, promoted by the growing influence of positivism, particularly on archaeology and art history. Second, it is naive to think that drawing aside the veil of Western interpretation will allow one to see truth unadorned. All interpretations are in terms of conceptual schemes, Mitter's included. We cannot choose to be without them. We can only choose between them. Those that make explicit both their biases and their preference for empiricism may be the ones to select. While Mitter does a masterful job of deconstructing Western perceptions of Indian art, he is silent about his own perspective. It is thus that the postmodern rejection of the possibility of grand narratives may itself become the new grand narrative.