

Phantasms of War and Empire in
Pat Barker's *The Ghost Road*
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Abstract: This essay interrogates the nature, limits, and effects of the juxtaposition of Great Britain and Melanesia that takes place in Pat Barker's *The Ghost Road* (1995), the final installment of the much-lauded *Regeneration* trilogy. Published two years before the handover of Hong Kong to the People's Republic of China, which marked the unofficial end of the British Empire, and four years after the end of the neocolonial charade of the first Gulf War, *The Ghost Road* brings its readers back to the beginning of the twentieth century, cannily meshing a carefully researched portrayal of the First World War with its protagonist's dreams and memories of a Melanesian society suffocating under the oppressive weight of colonial law. Drawing on Paul Gilroy's concept of postcolonial melancholia, we read the success of the Booker Prize-winning novel as reflecting a deep-seated anxiety about the downfall of empire(s) that continues to characterize political life in the West. The novel's strength lies in the way it highlights the insidious workings of class prejudices on the front lines, the complex matrix of sexuality, duty, and friendship that defined relationships between men in the trenches, and the reshuffling of traditional gender roles that the war brought about both at home and abroad. In spite of its merits, however, the transformative and challenging confrontation with the human cost of Britain's imperial transgressions that *The Ghost Road* offers is consistently deferred and masked behind its more visible portrayal of the melancholic fantasy of a racially homogenous, tragic, and exclusively Western First World War.

Keywords: Pat Barker; *The Ghost Road*; First World War; British Empire; postcolonial melancholia

Learning to live with difference has become an ethical and political imperative at the beginning of the twenty-first century, as the world's population soars, as new technologies continue to minimize the distances that separate cultures and communities, as traumatic social upheavals, revolutions, and acts of brutality continue to define relations within and across nations, and as the ambivalent effects of decolonization continue to be felt worldwide both by formerly colonized peoples and by their former colonizers. A thorough consideration of the encounters between disparate and powerful memories of victimhood, suffering, and war—so crucial to the formation of group and individual identities throughout the twentieth century and beyond—forms a central part of this undertaking, as demonstrated by the work of Paul Gilroy, Michael Rothberg, and others. The approaching centenary of the First World War will no doubt bring with it a reshuffling and reconsideration of the way that this particular war is memorialized in a variety of cultural contexts, offering a chance to plot the multifaceted interactions between dissenting voices and entrenched accounts of an important twentieth-century cultural trauma. With the death of the very last combat veteran of the war, Claude Choules, in May 2011, this confluence of memories will necessarily take place through the circulation of existing primary or secondary texts, lending an extra urgency to the task of critically re-examining canonical representations of the war, mapping their continuing contributions to twenty-first-century identity construction, and paying heed to and attempting to expand the often limited, Eurocentric bounds in which they operate.

Bearing the above in mind, this essay interrogates the nature, limits, and effects of the juxtaposition of Great Britain and Melanesia that takes place in Pat Barker's *The Ghost Road* (1995), the final installment of the much-lauded *Regeneration* trilogy. Published two years before the handover of Hong Kong to the People's Republic of China, which marked the unofficial end of the British Empire, and four years after the end of the neocolonial charade of the first Gulf War, *The Ghost Road* brings its readers back to the beginning of the twentieth century, cannily meshing a carefully researched portrayal of the First World War with its protagonist's dreams and memories of a Melanesian society

suffocating under the oppressive weight of colonial law. Drawing on Gilroy's concept of postcolonial melancholia, we read the success of the Booker Prize-winning novel as reflecting a deep-seated anxiety about the downfall of empire(s) that continues to characterize political life in the West. The perennial appeal of First World War literature in general, and Barker's novels in particular, can be understood at least partially in terms of their fulfillment of a wish for a racially defined British national unity in the face of increasingly fractured postcolonial identities. In addition to its myriad political and personal functions, remembrance of the First World War can grant nostalgic access to a time before the influx of formerly subjugated peoples into Britain forced the colonizers into an unwelcome confrontation with the Other whom the centre/periphery divide had previously kept at bay. The fact that the First World War can also be viewed as a watershed of the appalling industrialized violence endemic to the twentieth century is no barrier to this nostalgic use of the past, nor has Barker's pointed exposé of class prejudice in the trenches succeeded in denting the lingering cultural memory of British combatants "so closely bound," as Robert Graves put it, "by the wet bond of blood" (l. 13–14). In Gilroy's words, "[T]here is a sense in which Britain's brave but confused affiliates [citizens] prefer an ordered past in which they were exploited and pauperized, but nonetheless knew who they were, to a chronically chaotic present in which even those limited certainties have been stripped away by the new corporate mandate of interminable, regressive change" (109). That is, the perceived death of a generation of young, white, British, middle- and working-class men during the war has long since been transformed into an emblem of sacrifice on behalf of increasingly unrealistic, albeit persistent, fantasies of racial homogeneity and class solidarity.

As Sharon Monteith points out, Barker's fictions are situated at the intersection of concerns with class, gender, and sexuality: "If we believe that the historian writes through the lens of his [sic] own categories, so too does the novelist—novels often have agendas and preoccupations. For Barker, one such preoccupation . . . is how gender and class have shaped our understanding of labour and capitalism, warfare and the home front, the family, sex, and reproduction" (7). Later, Monteith

adds “[v]iolence, patriotism, and moral surety” to the list of subjects which “undergo a vigorous shaking across Barker’s oeuvre” (110). She rightly praises Barker’s exploration of these topics as “courageous, wry, and never less than interrogative” (110). However, the interconnected notions of race and colonialism—both of which are themes of *The Ghost Road*—are notably absent from Monteith’s tally. This apparent omission actually makes sense as these issues do not receive the same “vigorous shaking” as Barker’s other preoccupations. We suggest that for all its potential to reconfigure the whitewashed image of Britain’s past, *The Ghost Road*’s depiction of Melanesian society can also be located within the matrix of imperial nostalgia identified by Gilroy. Going against the grain of recent criticism, which tends to view Barker’s representations of Britain and Melanesia as equally weighted, mutually instructive, and therefore somehow postcolonial or postmodern in their appeal (Brown; Shaddock), we argue that the relationship between Britain and Melanesia in the text is characterized for the most part by a marked imbalance in their respective ontological positions. As Barker is almost always careful to remind us, the Melanesian scenes are relegated to the past, mediated entirely through the dreams, flashbacks, and memories of Dr. W.H.R. Rivers, the novel’s protagonist, as he goes about his work as a military psychiatrist in 1918. In the first section of this essay, we explore the content of Rivers’ recollections to argue that the lesser status of Melanesia is exemplified by Barker’s representation of Njiru, one of the natives, who is befriended by the British anthropologist. Because his existence in the text is entirely dependent upon Rivers’ internal mental processes, Njiru is a phantasmic, shifting figure, available for appropriation in service of the novel’s largely Eurocentric purview. Building on these observations, the second half of the essay reveals how the colonial culture’s subservience to the “main” European storyline is built into the structure of the novel. By seeking to tame his troublesome fantasies and integrate them into a fuller understanding of both himself and the European war in which he is situated, Rivers unconsciously reenacts the domination and subjection of the Other characteristic of the colonial project, albeit in a muted way that reaffirms rather than alarms late-twentieth-century sensibilities. As we will show, it is only in the closing

pages of the novel that Barker suggests that there might be more to the relationship between Melanesia and Britain than meets the eye. Thus, although *The Ghost Road* has the potential to stage a transformative confrontation between Britain and its past transgressions, the largely self-reflective use to which the Melanesian material is put does not explicitly address the lingering effects of decolonization and post-imperial guilt on the British psyche. Instead, the ambiguity of the novel and the primacy of the 1918 storyline allow it to be read as feeding into a “two-world-wars-and-one-World-Cup” (Gilroy 106–10) mentality that actively forgets the country’s colonial history by insisting on the First World War as a racially homogeneous, decidedly European conflict.

I. Dr. Njiru and Witch-Doctor Rivers

In order to properly analyze the effects of the juxtaposition of Melanesia and Britain that takes place in *The Ghost Road*, it is helpful to review the historical documents, figures, and events on which the novel is based. The *Regeneration* trilogy as a whole is well known for its imaginative synthesis of a wide body of both canonical and non-canonical writings from and about the First World War. What is less widely acknowledged and certainly not sufficiently discussed by critics is the source material for the Melanesian scenes—mainly Arthur Maurice Hocart’s “The Cult of the Dead in Eddystone of the Solomons.” By looking at the ways Barker reshapes this anthropological account, we demonstrate the novel’s tendency to reduce Melanesia and its inhabitants into easily digested, Westernized forms rather than to examine them through what Dennis Brown describes as a “postmodern social anthropology where communities, kinship systems, rituals and the like are valued on their own terms” (196). Admittedly, the Melanesian material is focalized through the fictional W.H.R. Rivers, whose attempts to understand the culture he encounters by weighing it against his own seem appropriate to the time in which the historical novel is set. As David Waterman writes, “Rivers is not a machine, able to analyze data in complete objectivity. . . . he is a man and, like all subjects, has been formed in a certain ideological context, even though he is more open-minded than most, better able to perceive the fictions on which culture is based” (84). Elsewhere in the

trilogy, however, Barker does imbue Rivers with a markedly late-twentieth-century perspective, which she chooses not to do here.¹ Instead of simply attributing the novel's Western bias to Rivers' sensibilities, therefore, we will explore how the version of the Other presented in *The Ghost Road* satisfies a Westernizing tendency on the part of the novel's readership and assess the effect of this representation at the intersection of memories of British colonialism and the First World War.

European interest in Melanesia dates back to the eighteenth century, but attempts at full-scale colonization did not begin until the middle of the nineteenth century, when missionaries and sandalwood traders began to frequent the islands and company-colonization schemes were put in place, mostly by German, British, and French entrepreneurs. By the end of the nineteenth century, large swathes of Melanesia were officially annexed or declared protectorates by the Netherlands, Britain, Germany, and France, a state of affairs that would last until well into the twentieth century. Increased European contact had a profound and often destructive effect on Melanesian societies. Most notoriously, from the 1860s to the end of the nineteenth century, labor recruitment or "blackbirding" became a common practice among Europeans in Melanesia. Ian Campbell writes that "[b]y 1865, there were several ships bringing Pacific islanders to Queensland and it was found that there was a strong demand for this new island commodity" (110). Although on the surface labor recruitment was a legitimate enterprise into which Melanesian workers entered willingly, in reality it was often comparable to the African slave trade in terms of recruitment methods, which frequently amounted to little more than kidnapping and the transport and treatment of workers (Campbell 111–12). In his account of the depopulation of Melanesia, "The Psychological Factor," Rivers himself adds several more factors to the list of causes for the "rapid decrease" of the native population (85). These include the spread of European diseases to the unprepared natives, the introduction of alcohol and opium, the proliferation of firearms, and the adoption by natives of European clothing and housing dangerously unsuited to the local climate (90–92). As the title of his paper implies, there was also a psychological explanation for the decrease in population; he found that many Melanesians

had essentially given up on life, which left them more vulnerable to disease. Using Eddystone Island as an example, Rivers describes “the people’s lack of interest in life [as being] largely due to the abolition of head-hunting by the British government. This practice formed the centre of a social and religious institution which took an all-pervading part in the lives of the people” (101). This phrasing is notably mirrored by *The Ghost Road’s* fictional Rivers (551).²

As for the historical specifics of Rivers’ journey itself: under the aegis of the Percy Sladen Trust, the historical W.H.R. Rivers did indeed travel to British Melanesia in 1908 in order to study the native culture of one of the smaller of the Solomon Islands, known then as Eddystone and now as Simbo. Accompanying Rivers was the younger anthropologist Arthur Maurice Hocart. The two men stayed together on Eddystone for three months, interviewing the islanders about their beliefs and kinship structures and documenting many of the rituals, sacred or otherwise, that regimented their daily lives. Bits and pieces of this work show up in Rivers’ *The History of Melanesian Society* (1914) and in his later lectures and articles, where he tends either to discuss Eddystone anecdotally in connection with other scientific concerns (e.g., “The Primitive Conception of Death”) or to use his experiences as a basis for expounding his views on Melanesian issues more generally (“The Psychological Factor”). Hocart’s account, by contrast, is spread across a series of articles published in *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*. Compared to Rivers’ lengthy *History*, Hocart’s papers provide a more coherent and accessible impression of the trip itself.

In the most extensive of these, the two-part “The Cult of the Dead in Eddystone of the Solomons” (1922), Hocart outlines how the Melanesian research was undertaken. “Our joint work,” he writes, “was apportioned according to subjects, Dr. Rivers taking kinship, social organization, ghosts, gods, and other subjects, while I took death, fishing, warfare; a few subjects, such as the house, were joint” (71). Because neither of the men was fluent in the native language, they had to enlist various islanders as interpreters. However, they were able to communicate with them only in “the most rudimentary” pidgin, a state of affairs that Hocart admits was “certainly not ideal” (72).³ The unscientific

minds of the natives presented another obstacle. Hocart praises the “vast knowledge” of some and the “accuracy” of others, but he considers them to be “mostly poor” interpreters overall, presumably because they were untrained in formulating the sort of objective cultural commentary required by the anthropologists (72–73). There were some exceptions to this, though. One of the islanders, Njiruviri, “turned out to be not only the best interpreter, but head and shoulders the best informant” (72). Hocart describes Njiruviri as “an original scholar and thinker,” and his admiration for the native is plain from his initial description:

[Njiruviri’s] knowledge was not only vast, but most accurate: reluctant to give away the secret formulæ, he was mercilessly conscientious in repeating them once he had been induced to do so. He knew exactly how much he knew, and always distinguished theories from facts. Had he been a European he would have ranked high among the learned, and an account of the island based on his evidence alone would still be invaluable. (72)

The article ends with close-up shots of some of the natives. Njiruviri’s photograph (fig. 1) is particularly striking. His gaze at the camera is level, but he squints guardedly as though suspicious of the lens, the Western man behind it, and the remote economic and social mechanisms that brought them both to his island. Though it had not properly reached Eddystone itself by 1908, the calamitous effect that European colonization was having and would continue to have on the Melanesian way of life makes it difficult to regard Njiruviri’s suspicion as anything other than justified.

By now “The Cult of the Dead in Eddystone of the Solomons” might have passed relatively quietly into the annals of anthropological history were it not for the fact that Barker uses it as one of the main (albeit unacknowledged) source texts for *The Ghost Road*.⁴ By incorporating fragments of Hocart’s report into the novel, Barker imaginatively breathes life back into Hocart and the many natives he describes. She acknowledges in the “Author’s Note” that closes the text that “Njiru, Kundaite, Namboko Taru, Namboko Emele, Nareti, Lembu and the

captive child are . . . historical, but of them nothing more is known” (*GR* 591). Among these figures, Njiru plays undoubtedly the most central role, although Barker’s approach to him differs significantly from Hocart’s. The young anthropologist expresses gratitude and relief for discovering in Njiruviri a reliable and intelligent interpreter with whom he can foster a useful working relationship. Rather than reiterating this dynamic, Barker focuses on charting the development of a turbulent friendship between Njiru and Rivers, relegating the fictional Hocart to no more than a supporting role.

In her reading of the novel, Jennifer Shaddock notes the “remarkable” similarities between the islander and the older anthropologist:

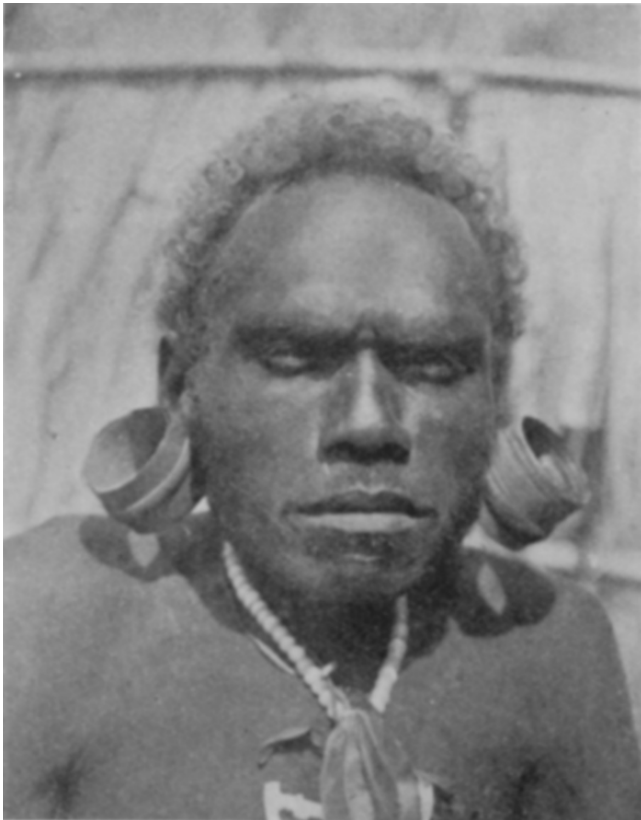


Figure 1. Photograph of Njiruviri

[B]oth . . . are middle-aged; both are accomplished healers (though they practice medicine in fundamentally different ways); both have disabilities that have shaped their adult identities (Njiru has a severe spinal curvature and Rivers a paralytic stammer), and both . . . hold positions of great respect and authority within their own cultures . . . both men are detached from the ordinary activities of men in their respective cultures—neither has a family and though both descend from distinguished warriors, neither participates in the military pursuits that define virility in their respective cultural contexts. (660)

The strong parallels Shaddock describes here are instrumental in establishing the friendship between Rivers and Njiru and by extension the links between Britain and Melanesia on which the novel relies. It is through the insights afforded by his time with Njiru that Rivers is able to assess “the barbaric elements of his own inculcated ideology of British manhood, war, and civilization” (Shaddock 657). This leads him, by the end of the novel, to repudiate his initial complicity with the war, resolving the doubts about the war’s human costs that have plagued him throughout the trilogy. The cross-cultural similarities that enable this process do not arise naturally from Hocart’s article but result instead from Barker’s selective reworking of the anthropologist’s original prose. This can best be demonstrated by looking at the telling changes made by Barker to Hocart’s initial description of the native, each of which seems calculated to foreground potential similarities between the European and the Melanesian, minimizing or relativizing the latter’s Otherness in order to allow the cross-cultural friendship to flourish.

According to Hocart, “debarred by being a hunch-back from great physical activity, [Njiruviri] had devoted himself to thought and learning” (72). In *The Ghost Road*, Barker grants this observation to Rivers instead, and she rejigs it to read: “Because of [Njiru’s] deformity, he’d never been able to compete with the other young men, in canoeing, fishing, building or war. By way of compensation, he’d devoted himself to thought and learning, and, in particular, to the art of healing” (504).

Barker's addition of "the art of healing" to the career of "thought and learning" taken up by Njiru is crucial. The trilogy has already portrayed Rivers as a formidable healer by this point, and much of *The Ghost Road* shows a concern with establishing the same reputation for his native counterpart, stressing the importance of medicine as a link between the two men and their respective cultures. The very first Melanesian flashback Rivers has in the novel is to Njiru's treatment of Namboko Toru, a native woman suffering from chronic constipation. The scene derives from "Massage in Melanesia," a short chapter of Rivers' *Psychology and Ethnology* (1926). The historical Rivers writes that "the treatment consisted chiefly of abdominal massage carried on, so far as I could tell, just as it would have been by a European expert" (57). Barker's fictional Rivers similarly considers that "as a treatment for simple constipation the massage could hardly have been bettered, and had not differed in any essential respect from western massage, until near the very end" (*GR* 458). The divergence from Western practice occurs in the novel when, "with a barking cry, Njiru seemed to catch something, shielded it in his cupped hands while he crawled to the door, and then threw it as far as he could into the bush" (458). The object he removes—or pretends to remove—is the *tagosoro*: "an octopus," according to Njiru, "that had taken up residence in the lower intestine, from where its tentacles might spread until they reached the throat" (*GR* 458).⁵ Behind this "native belief," Rivers detects "the shadowy outline of a disease only too familiar to western medicine" (458)—colon cancer, presumably, although it is never named as such. For all its oddity, after the massage the patient seems "far happier": the massage temporarily abates her constipation and she "believed she was cured" (458). Moreover, Rivers notes that the "curious hypnotic effect" of Njiru's treatment and the "sense of being totally focused on, totally cared for" which he cultivates makes him "a good doctor, no matter how many octopi he located in the colon" (458–59). In order to praise aspects of Njiru's treatment that conform to Western standards of medicine, Rivers sets aside and even gently mocks the belief in the *tagosoro* that places the treatment—and its practitioner—within a particular Melanesian cultural setting. Barker's Njiru does not seem to mind this. In fact, when he is asked by Rivers to

repeat the massage on the anthropologist himself, he does not finish by catching and disposing of the *tagosoro* but merely “[sits] back, smiling, terminating the physical contact as tactfully as he’d initiated it” (459). Upon questioning, the native explains to Rivers: “You no got *ngassin*” (459). The “gleam of irony” (459) with which he says this, however, suggests that Barker’s Njiru is in on the joke: he recognizes how absurd the treatment and the belief behind it appears to Western eyes. It is unclear whether he himself even believes in the *tagosoro*; the point is that his patient should believe in it. What Njiru’s irony suggests is that he and Rivers are linked by a shared awareness of the universality of the basic elements of human psychology that make their treatments effective; these are perceived by both men to be more important than the particular local narrative that frames the psychosomatic work, although, as Waterman suggests, “a good doctor must [also] keep in mind local norms and beliefs in order to genuinely cure his patients in a holistic way, never forgetting that much of what holds people and societies together is irrational” (85).

This is well illustrated by the context in which Rivers remembers this particular Melanesian experience. Appropriately, Rivers recalls the *tagosoro* vignette while performing his own “magical solution” on Moffet, a patient suffering from hysterical paralysis that prevents the use of his legs (*GR* 457). He breaks Moffet’s “reliance on the physical symptom” by drawing stocking tops in pencil around his inert thighs (441). Every day he washes the lines off and redraws them lower, convincing his patient that sensation and mobility are gradually being restored to the freshly revealed areas. By the time the stockings are “rolled down” most of the way, Moffet accepts that the treatment has worked: he can walk again, albeit clumsily and not without an arm over Rivers’ shoulder (461). It is clear that Barker juxtaposes the Melanesian and British treatments in order to suggest an underlying similarity between Njiru’s and Rivers’ remedies, both of which involve not only bona fide medical care—Rivers massages Moffet’s legs, just as Njiru massaged his patient’s abdomen—but also the more difficult feat of convincing the patient to place trust in the physician and believe in the efficacy of the treatment. While he draws the lines around Moffet’s legs, Rivers even admits to

himself that “a witch-doctor could do this . . . and probably better than I can” (457). It is implied that Rivers’ memory of the Melanesian cure gives him a more comprehensive understanding of the psychological processes underlying his own practices. This ultimately allows him to better—or at least more self-consciously—treat his patients: knowledge from the colonial periphery brought back and put to use at the imperial centre.

The very neatness of the medical link, however, reveals its fictional nature. In fact, Hocart makes no mention of Njiruviri treating Namboko Toru; the native woman actually dies relatively early on in his reports, although she remains vigorously alive in the novel, even flirting with Rivers at one point. Rivers, for his part, does not give the witch-doctor’s name in his paper, nor that of his patient. Barker creates the Namboko Toru scene by slotting elements of Hocart’s articles into the structure of the treatment outlined by Rivers in “Massage in Melanesia.” The “native medico” (“Massage” 57) is assumed by Barker to have been Njiruviri because it presents her with a compelling way of linking him to Rivers through the shared role of doctor. But Njiruviri was not a doctor, no matter how tempting it might be for Rivers to understand him as such. There is no denying that he was a respected practitioner of magic within his own culture, a role that involves both healing and harming as related in another of Hocart’s reports, “Witchcraft”. The title of “doctor,” though, carries a great deal of cultural baggage and behavioral expectations that simply did not apply in Melanesian society, at least as described in Barker’s sources. As quoted above, the historical Hocart does state that “had he been a European,” Njiruviri would have “ranked high among the learned” (72), but this is not the same as calling him “a good doctor” (*GR* 459), an act that more obviously instantiates the fictionalized Rivers’ attempts to relate to Njiru by translating him into Western terms. Though the designation might initially seem undamaging and even flattering—what greater accolade is there than to be known as a medical doctor, a healer of ills?—it actually does conceptual violence to Njiruviri because it contains the implicit assumption that the native can be made comprehensible and therefore valuable only insofar as he can be classified within a European system of social roles. A pattern can

be discerned here that is repeated throughout the novel: Njiru's appearances are usually based to an extent on historical sources, but Barker imaginatively fleshes out or trims pieces away from the scenes that her sources describe, blurring fact and fiction in her characteristic style in order to emphasize the links between the two cultures on which her particular depiction of the First World War relies.

This process of revision is not usually problematic in itself, nor is it entirely limited to Njiru and the other Melanesians: after all, many of Barker's other characters undergo the same treatment, Rivers not least of all. The real issue with the way the novel uses Njiru becomes apparent only when one considers the density of the historical documentation surrounding Barker's more famous Western characters in comparison to her Melanesian ones. Imaginative as they are and as influential as they have become, the trilogy's versions of Rivers and the celebrated soldier poets Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon are kept more or less in check by the vast and carefully regulated archives in which their work is enshrined. Sassoon and Owen's conversations in *Regeneration*, for example, are painstakingly constructed with reference to well-researched biographies and the many letters and drafts of poems exchanged between them. Njiruviri, conversely, hails from a society about which the majority of Barker's readership presumably knows next to nothing. He is mentioned in only a handful of relatively obscure sources, none of which penetrate at all into popular culture, and hitherto there have been no parties either interested or vocal enough to point out the alterations Barker makes in portraying him nor to consider what these alterations can reveal about the social and political conditions in which the novel was produced and received. Moreover, because Njiru exists entirely within Rivers' memories, he is doubly susceptible to appropriation in a way that the other Western characters, who exist on the same ontological plane as Rivers, are not. He is the subject of reinterpretation by both Rivers and Barker, an open and ambiguous space for imaginative projection, just documented enough to acquire an air of historical authenticity but not so well-known that the author is discouraged from describing him in ways for which there is little evidence in her source texts. This is reflected by the fact that, unlike with Rivers, Sassoon, or Owen, so few

critics have sought the historical Njiruviri screened behind the fictional one—a result of what Gilroy has termed “postcolonial melancholia.”

At least within a British critical tradition, a prolonged analysis of imperialism can be “a source of discomfort, shame, and perplexity” (Gilroy 90). According to Gilroy, frankly discussing imperialism means recognizing the instrumental role that racism played in fuelling the colonial project and justifying its many atrocities. As he argues, critically engaging with past racisms is both unfashionable and uncomfortable because it inevitably leads to the recognition that racist and/or colonial discourses are still at work within post-imperial Britain, albeit in altered, though no less damaging forms. The inability to address or even perceive institutional racism, or worse, to spurn such attempts as “politically correct,” is symptomatic of postcolonial melancholia—a nostalgic longing for and refusal to mourn the faded imperial past. Viewing the prevalence of this disorder and its symptoms as a major barrier to a much-needed multicultural ethics, Gilroy advocates attending to and working through the loss of empire in order to reimagine it as a formative experience with the potential to create new types of solidarity that do not rely on a “monstrously exaggerated sense of the country’s importance” (110).

Although Barker’s depiction of Melanesia is consistently sympathetic to Njiru’s plight, it does not explicitly challenge postcolonial melancholia. By adapting her source material so that the friendship between Rivers and Njiru takes centre stage, Barker leaves her reader with little choice but to process Melanesia primarily through its similarity or divergence from the more rounded Western society with which it is juxtaposed rather than as a rich and sophisticated culture in its own right. Aside from the few instances in which Rivers visualizes himself from the perspective of the natives, the novel mostly depicts Rivers’ side of the encounters between Melanesian and European—the reader is never allowed to see anything that Rivers is not also privy to. Though consistent with the rest of the trilogy, with regard to the Melanesian scenes this structuring can be read as inadvertently reinforcing an old imperialist mechanism whereby the colonized subject is not constituted independently, a priori, as an autonomous subject, but instead springs into existence based on his or her relationship with the colonizing power. The

implicit rather than overt criticism of the imperial project, moreover, means that the novel is able to sit comfortably within a whitewashed mythology of the First World War, most especially because it appeases some measure of postcolonial guilt by at least gesturing towards Britain's imperial past. In fact, because "it both hides and reveals that which has been suppressed," the novel's partial engagement with European colonization functions as what Michael Rothberg, following Freud, has termed "screen memory" (14)—it replaces an uncomfortable, potentially painful memory with a safer one while leaving traces of the suppressed history intact. This goes some way to explaining the novel's critical acclaim and continued popularity, even though the crucial Melanesian scenes have, for the most part, been ignored: by accepting Barker's depiction of Melanesia more or less at face value, the reader is inoculated against a more thorough investigation of Britain's past transgressions that might conflict painfully with postcolonial melancholia's pathological impulse to forget.

II. Rivers' Dreams as Imperial Fantasies

Despite the "progressively broadened geographical scope" that the Melanesian segments have been hailed as bringing to the trilogy (Shaddock 658), *The Ghost Road* fails to shake off what Barker herself has referred to as the "claustrophobic feel" of the first two novels (qtd. in Stevenson 183), largely on account of the ontological gap that is maintained between the Melanesian material and the rest of the text. While Barker does take Rivers "out of his chair," as she claims (qtd. in Stevenson 183), it is only to transfer him into his bed, where he suffers from a high fever, a symptom of the Spanish Flu that he has contracted from one of his patients. Rivers' subsequent isolation in the quiet darkness of his room reenacts the condition of his sister, Katherine Rivers, described earlier in the novel. Katherine has spent her life confined to increasingly small spaces—"to the house, then to the bedroom, then to the bed"—as a result of her supposedly "deteriorating health" (*GR* 481). Because her otherwise sharp mind is "deprived of other nourishment" during her endless convalescence, it inevitably "[feeds] on itself" (*GR* 481). She lives in the past of her childhood, signalled by

the “[b]lue and pink” she wears, the “colours of the nursery” that she never quite grew out of (*GR* 478). She is an eager collector of memories and their material traces, photographs, which she peruses with Rivers when he comes to visit. Together, they reconstruct childhood stories of Charles Dodgson (a.k.a. Lewis Carroll), whom the historical Rivers’ father treated for chronic stammering. When he too is pent up in his room, Rivers responds to sensory deprivation in much the same way as his sister, reliving his memories of Eddystone with the intense clarity of a lucid dreamer. That he is able to do this so vividly is thanks to the fever he suffers, which opens his mind’s eye and frees his otherwise atrophied ability to visualize. As explained earlier in the trilogy, Rivers lost his visual memory as a child. However, it returns “[a]lways, in a high fever . . . giving him a secret, obscurely shameful pleasure in being ill” (*GR* 499). Because the reader knows Rivers is feverish, the Melanesian material is imbued with a hallucinatory quality. This is compounded by the fact that Rivers’ recollections before and after his illness are as vivid as his fevered visions so that waking and dreaming, illness and health seem to seep freely into one another. The narration of the Melanesian material in the same past tense as the rest of the novel, moreover, further erodes distinctions between past and present, fantasy and reality, resulting in the disorientation of both Rivers and the reader.

As we suggested earlier, however, the ontological separation of Melanesia and Britain does remain intact, as indistinct as it might appear to become. As much as Rivers seems to travel back to Melanesia in both body and mind during his dreams, hallucinations, and flashbacks, Barker never lets us forget his physical location in the present, either holed up in bed during his illness or going about his duties on the ward. For example, at arguably the most emotionally intense moment of the novel, Rivers—lost deep in a fevered sleep—relives a visit he made with Njiru to a cave lined with innumerable bats. When Njiru accidentally drops his torch on the cave floor, the startled bats take flight, streaming around the two men towards the exit. “Rivers,” the reader is told, “barely had time to see the beam of light become a tunnel filled with struggling shapes before he was enclosed in flapping squeaking screaming darkness, blinded, his skin shrinking from the contact that

never came" (*GR* 526). In the silence that follows, Rivers "discovered that he was gripping Njiru's hand" (526).⁶ The hand-holding seems to be one of the few times in the novel when there is a sense of equality between the two cultures, and it echoes an earlier scene in which Rivers, after questioning and being questioned by a group of uprooted natives, realizes that "their view of *his* society was neither more nor less valid than his of theirs . . . and with that realization, the whole frame of social and moral rules . . . collapsed, and for a moment he was in the same position as these drifting dispossessed people. A condition of absolute freefall" (500; emphasis in original). Mark Rawlinson argues that within this scene, the "contraries" between "academic certitude" and "the mind confronting the paradoxes of experience . . . are emblematic of Barker's achievement in preventing the ideas in her novels from sedimenting into hierarchies or either/or disjunctions" (98). Similarly, Jennifer Shaddock identifies the hand-holding in the cave as the novel's pivotal moment because it enacts one of the "flashes of cross-cultural recognition" (*GR* 498) that, in her view, enable Rivers "to put his own deeply acculturated mores in perspective and begin to integrate an alternative set of cultural beliefs and practices into both his medical practice and ultimately his politics" (666). It is difficult to find fault with this reading.

What is notable, however, is that neither Shaddock nor Rawlinson address the very short scene that interrupts the Melanesian narrative, when Rivers momentarily wakes up. The passage is opened by a "shaft of sunlight" that strikes Rivers' eyes. At first it seems part of the cave memory, but this is swiftly belied by the presence of Miss Irving, Rivers' landlady, who has roused her tenant from sleep by opening his curtains. By bringing her protagonist back to the surface of consciousness like this, even for the meager space of half a page, Barker reminds her reader of the embodiedness of Rivers' roving mind, its positioning in a very specific time and place—not an Eddystone cave but a comfortable bedroom in the relative safety of wartime London. To be sure, the two timelines are very closely linked by Rivers, who focalizes and moves freely between both; the cave even crosses over into 1918 to an extent, in the form of "the fur" of the bats that the waking Rivers feels had "got on to his teeth," and the darkness of the room after Miss Irving draws

the curtains, which “remind[s] him of the cave” (527). At the same time, though, Barker acknowledges and carefully signposts the ontological distance—the pastness—of the past. Rivers immediately delves back into his memories as soon as Miss Irving withdraws, but by this time some of the illusion’s force has been dispelled and the reader is left wary of the very deliberate way in which his insights have been and continue to be framed. As such, Barker ensures that the Melanesian scenes, for all their potential to subvert an otherwise paradigmatic narrative of the war, are kept comfortably at arm’s length, rendered as hallucinatory and fantastic, or phantasmic.

The phantasm is an image of reality that seems initially to possess authentic, external existence but is subsequently revealed to be merely an outward manifestation of internal mental phenomena, assembled from fragments of lived experience.⁷ It is a particularly useful term to apply to *The Ghost Road*: not only does it evoke the lifelike nature of Njiru and the Melanesian scenes while recognizing their origin in Rivers’ imagination, it also resonates with the ghosts of the novel’s title. The phantasm is a liminal, uncanny apparition. It occupies the hazy border zone between fact and fiction, which is also the site of creative potential, self-discovery, and imaginative problem solving. This is aptly demonstrated in *Regeneration* (1991), the first novel of the trilogy, when the fictionalized Siegfried Sassoon confronts “the noiseless dead,” images of soldiers previously under his command who “gather about [his] bed” and “whisper to [his] heart,” questioning his prolonged stay at the Craiglockhart military hospital (168). By recognizing that “their thoughts are [his],” Sassoon acknowledges them as phantasms, but they still have the very real effect of galvanizing his decision to return to France; as Rivers later theorizes, the questions they ask become “more insistent, more powerful, for being projected into the mouths of the dead” (*GR* 554). Sassoon even wrings several poems from the experience. Rivers’ encounters with his own apparitions are not as explicitly ghostly as Sassoon’s, but they are no less productive. As suggested earlier, by accessing only those memories of the island that are most pertinent to his current situation, Rivers is able to arrive at a greater understanding of himself, his medical practices, and his society, culminating in his final rejection of the war.

Because of this, his recollections point towards another connotation of the phantasm: the notion of fantasy and desire. Following the structure of postcolonial melancholia mentioned above, Rivers' numerous sojourns into memory enact an unconscious drive to exert control over—in a sense, to re-colonize—the troublesome Melanesian past, making it useful in the context of the more important British present, but at the cost of rendering it ghostly and fantastic.⁸

This is nowhere better illustrated than during the very first and very last meetings between Rivers and Njiru. The first occurs when Rivers and Hocart initially make camp on Eddystone. After Hocart retires to the tent, Rivers immediately sets to work repairing the “badly smoking” oil lamp set up outside. Rather than being reworked from a source text, the lengthy passage that follows seems to be entirely Barker's creation, demonstrating her awareness of the way that Njiru's lack of historical depth, combined with his positioning within Rivers' memory, makes him readable as a phantasmic figure:

Working so close to the light, [Rivers] was almost blinded and could see virtually nothing even when he raised his head. He was aware of the thick darkness of the bush around him, but more as a pressure on his mind than through his senses. Once he stopped, thinking he heard a flute being played in the village. He sniffed the oil on his fingers, wiped his chin on the back of his hand, and sat back for a rest, his retinas aching as they do after an optician has shone his torch on to them. He took his glasses off and wiped them on his shirt. When he put them on again he saw a figure had come out from among the trees, and was standing on the edge of the clearing. A man in early middle age, white lime streaks in his hair, around the eye sockets, and along the cheek and jaw-bones, so that it seemed—until he caught the glint of eye white—that he was looking at a skull. He sat absolutely still, as the man came towards him. (*GR* 503–04)

The binaries of vision and blindness, light and dark, appearance and reality in this description are remarkable. Every single image employed by

Barker seems calculated to alert the reader to the overwhelming strangeness of the encounter and to arouse the suspicion that nothing here should be taken at face value: the focus on Rivers' strained eyes and the difficulty of seeing clearly, his taking off and putting back on of his glasses, the mysterious, dreamlike music drifting in from the forest. The bush, swathed in darkness, exerts a psychological and a symbolic presence rather than a physical one. Bearing in mind the framing of the Melanesian scenes as dreams and flashbacks, the darkness can be read as marking out a blank space in Rivers' memories. Unable to see into the bush at the time the remembered experience occurred, he is similarly unable to see beyond it in his recollections. More importantly, the darkness of the bush also signifies the limits of what is possible for the Western gaze to catalogue at all. The bush symbolizes the unmapped space into which Barker's historical sources do not venture and which is inaccessible, therefore, to all but imaginative representations. For Rivers, similarly, the bush stands in for the truly unknowable and the absolutely alien. It is the ahistorical heart of darkness from which Njiru emerges, a foreign space that cannot be relativized by filtering it through a European anthropological perspective.

Crucially, these ambiguous symbolic roles are transferred onto Njiru. It is notable that Rivers does not see Njiru stepping "out from among the trees": one moment the native is not (there) and the next moment he is (there), appearing, like an optical illusion, almost literally in the blink of an eye. He is seemingly produced by the unknown that the darkness represents and by the work of Rivers' psyche in calling forth a comprehensible—albeit ghostly—presence from the depths of his memory. When he first enters the scene, Njiru stands poised in the liminal space between the clearing and the trees, the border between being fully seen and remaining unknown. He perches also on the threshold between existence and non-existence: it is only because he became known to the historical Hocart and Rivers that Njiru was able to live on in the sources on which the novel is based. His inclusion in the text at all, therefore, is entirely contingent on the extent to which he was interesting to the European anthropologists. Barker seems to acknowledge this phantasmic hovering between life and death, signified by the fact that Rivers

initially mistakes the native's face for a skull. He recognizes the humanity of Njiru only when the native steps forward into the light of the Westerner's lamp, sits down, and addresses Rivers in English, thereby revealing himself as a potentially useful interpreter (504).⁹

The other remarkable border-crossing between two states of existence occurs at the novel's close. Thoroughly exhausted from a night shift in the hospital and having renounced his support for the war only moments earlier following the drawn-out death of Hallet, a hideously wounded young soldier, "Rivers, slumped at the nurses' station, struggles to stay awake" (589). The shift to the present tense that takes place here is disorienting for the reader and paves the way for the crossover between past and present, fantasy and reality, with which the novel culminates:

On the edge of sleep he hears Njiru's voice, repeating the words of the exorcism of Ave.

O Sumbi! O Gesese! O Palapoko! O Gorepoko! O you Ngengere at the root of the sky. Go down, depart ye.

And there, suddenly, not separate from the ward, not in any way ghostly, not in *fashion blong tomate*, but himself in every particular, advancing down the ward of the Empire Hospital, attended by his shadowy retinue, as Rivers had so often seen him on the coastal path on Eddystone, came Njiru.

There is an end of men, an end of chiefs, an end of chieftains' wives, an end of chiefs' children—then go down and depart. Do not yearn for us, the fingerless, the crippled, the broken. Go down and depart, oh, oh, oh.

He bent over Rivers, staring into his face with those piercing hooded eyes. A long moment, and then the brown face, with its streaks of lime, faded into the light of the daytime ward. (589–90)

This passage is heavily multivalent, able to be read on several levels in order to reveal different shades of Barker's engagement with empire. An initial common sense reading would suggest that Rivers, "[o]n the edge of sleep," continues to fantasize about Njiru in a manner similar to his fevered dreams earlier in the novel. By extension, Britain continues to

be ontologically superior to Melanesia, which is accessible only through imaginative reconstruction by a Western consciousness. Thus the exorcism, which is translated by Rivers into English and therefore not spoken by Njiru at all, can be interpreted as not only dispelling Njiru but also as eulogizing Hallet and the other young men destroyed by war—"the fingerless, the crippled, the broken"—in a final appropriation and domestication of the voice of the Other into a specifically European act of mourning.

However, this reading fails to take account of the many ambiguities in the passage, which mobilizes a more subtle critique of the imperial project. Not only does the exorcism initially and oddly herald the *appearance* of Njiru in a Western setting for the very first time, but he is also described as being "not in any way ghostly." In fact, Njiru actually exerts a greater sense of presence, striding authoritatively through the hospital, than the passive Rivers, who is reduced by this point to merely sitting still and becoming the object of Njiru's "piercing" gaze. It is also significant that Njiru finally fades not into darkness, as one might expect, but into light. The question is, who is being exorcised here? Does Rivers dream Njiru, or does Njiru in the end, perhaps, dream Rivers? Which figure is phantasmic and which is real? In an exception that proves the rule of *The Ghost Road's* usual diligence in maintaining an ontological distinction between Britain and Melanesia, the difficulty of resolving these problems in the closing pages finally dismantles the binary of centre and periphery. In this reading, Njiru's appearance at the centre of the Empire, "attended by his shadowy retinue," actually anticipates the end of the British Empire by forecasting the post-World-War-II migration to Britain of the formerly colonized.

In sum, the ambiguity of *The Ghost Road's* ending, coupled with the novel's earlier depiction of Melanesians as suffering under the British yoke, gestures towards a deeper criticism of Britain's imperial ambitions, making the novel admissible within a postcolonial canon. This gesture, however, is as far as Barker goes: the trilogy ends with Rivers objecting to the war viscerally and emotionally. "It's not worth it," he chants, or thinks he chants (588–89), along with his patients. However, this occurs before he is able to fully articulate a political or ideological cri-

tique of the colonial project that motivated the war in the first place. Although Rivers' development is informed by his Melanesian experiences throughout *The Ghost Road*, his disgust at the war seems to bubble over, finally, as a result of the death of Hallett—a young, white, British, and therefore mournable figure. It is notable that no colonial soldiers are included in the novel, since this would force the reader into a potentially unsettling consideration of the role of non-white, non-British troops in the war effort, obliging him or her “to work through the grim details of imperial and colonial history” (Gilroy 99).¹⁰ In this light, the terminal disappearance of Njiru’s “brown face” (589) would seem to satisfy the impulse of postcolonial melancholia to whitewash and sanitize the history of empire, of which the First World War was a part. As such, although *The Ghost Road* offers the possibility of intervening in how the war and empire are remembered in contemporary Britain, the clues to this potential reconfiguration are subtle enough to be opaque to readers who are not predisposed to search for them.¹¹ The novel’s strength lies in the way it highlights the insidious workings of class prejudices on the front lines, the complex matrix of sexuality, duty, and friendship that defined relationships between men in the trenches, and the reshuffling of traditional gender roles that the war brought about both at home and abroad. In spite of these merits, however, the transformative and challenging confrontation with the human cost of Britain’s imperial transgressions that *The Ghost Road* offers is consistently deferred and masked behind its more visible portrayal of the melancholic fantasy of a racially homogenous, tragic, and exclusively Western First World War.

Notes

- 1 This is most notable in *Regeneration*, where Rivers witnesses a confrontation between the disciplinary therapist Lewis R. Yealland and his shell-shocked patient Callan. In this earlier novel, Barker uses Rivers as a representative of late-twentieth-century views on psychiatric care, trauma, and torture (Smethurst).
- 2 Further details concerning the colonization and eventual independence of Melanesia can be found in Brookfield’s *Colonialism Development and Independence: The Case of the Melanesian Islands in the South Pacific*.

- 3 In a later article Hocart warns that “[t]o discourse on Melanesia without knowing the language is as unsafe as studying Greek antiquities without knowing a word of Greek” (“Medicine” 229).
- 4 In fact, Hocart’s reports are cited occasionally but almost always in the context of anthropological discussions of the Solomons, where his observations are still useful in mapping the history and culture of the islands. See, for example, Burman’s (1981) and Thomas, Sheppard, and Walter’s articles (2001), which recognize Hocart’s fieldwork as “pioneering” (Thomas et al. 549), if at times problematic and unpolished (Burman).
- 5 In the novel, Barker confuses the *nggasin*—the name of the disease—with the *tagosoro*—the octopus-like creature that causes the symptoms, according to Rivers’ original piece. This slip can be read as symptomatic of Barker’s lack of interest in maintaining the precise historical accuracy of the Melanesian narrative.
- 6 The Melanesian cave scene is strongly reminiscent of the famous Marabar Caves sequence in Forster’s *A Passage to India*. Whereas Forster uses the caves episode to illustrate a failure to connect across cultural boundaries, Barker repurposes it to signify the opposite: the forging of cross-cultural ties between a European and a non-European character. Knutsen, in *Reciprocal Haunting: Pat Barker’s Regeneration Trilogy*, points out intertextual links to Forster elsewhere in Barker’s work (see especially 98–100).
- 7 We use the word “phantasm” in this article almost exclusively in the sense of a mental image or an apparition. As Stigl has pointed out, however, the phantasm has a long history of usage within “literature and metaphor, history of science and culture, and, of course, postmodern philosophy,” and by well-known theorists such as Deleuze and Žižek.
- 8 Admittedly, there are several descriptive passages of Melanesian life in the novel that do not seem either ghostly or fantastic. Pages 505–510, for example, consist of Rivers accompanying Njiru on his rounds and making close observations, then comparing notes with Hocart. If anything, these comparatively mundane passages throw the briefer, more phantasmic segments of the novel into sharper relief. They also have the effect of rounding out Barker’s depiction of Melanesian society, although it is notable that Rivers still attempts to liken his experiences in Melanesia to his experiences in Britain. When he naively asks of Njiru, “Was the *sagena* the same as the soul?” Barker translates Njiru’s reply to liken him to Rivers’ instructor at St. Bartholomew’s Hospital: “‘Of course it wasn’t,’ Njiru snapped, nostrils flaring with impatience. Oh God, it was Bart’s all over again. *Heaven help the unsuspecting public when we let you loose on them*” (508–09; emphasis in original).
- 9 The delayed recognition that occurs here resonates unmistakably with Freud’s concept of the uncanny. Brannigan provides a helpful explanation of the uncanny, which he uses to analyze the specters that seem to haunt Rivers’ patients and, to an extent, Rivers himself (see especially 101–02).

- 10 An essay collection titled *Race, Empire and First World War Writing* and edited by Das exemplifies recent attempts by cultural and literary theorists to uncover and acknowledge the role played by colonial troops during the First World War as described in first-hand accounts by both Western soldiers and their non-Western counterparts.
- 11 A glance through reviews of *The Ghost Road* on *Amazon.co.uk* reveals that only a few reviewers engaged with the Melanesian material at all, with the majority focusing their attention exclusively on the novel's 1918 sections set in Britain and France.

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