

Book review

GENDER ON THE EDGE: TRANSGENDER, GAY, AND OTHER PACIFIC ISLANDERS

Edited by Niko Besnier and Kalissa Alexeyeff

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The 1990s were marked by a spate of sustained ethnographies of non-western transgendered and other non-heteronormative populations (e.g., Johnson, 1997; Kulick, 1998; Nanda, 1990; Prieur, 1998; Williams, 1992/1986) and texts (edited or sole-authored) which discussed instances of these identities and behaviours in various locales and/or times (Feinberg, 1996; Herdt, 1993; Nanda, 2000). Since then there has been a relatively steady stream of journal articles and monographs in the area, both anthropological and from other disciplines. *Gender on the edge: Transgender, gay, and other Pacific Islanders* represents the first edited collection that focuses specifically on Pacific trans and other non-normative gender identities, an approach that is particularly suited to this geographic area, as the instantiations of non-normative genders and sexualities on the various island nations share certain features, but are also unique to their own cultural, political, and economic contexts.

While this collection is the work of 14 different authors, the individual pieces are bound together by two fundamental aspects. Firstly, non-normative identities are discussed in relation to their own cultural context. Much writing on non-western transgenderism positions the participants as somehow 'strange', implicitly comparing them to western models of sex/gender/sexuality, and also frequently isolates non-western transgendered peoples and practices 'as a separate category to be studied independently from other dynamics in society and culture' (p. 10). However, within their respective cultural contexts, most instances of non-western transgenderism are relatively 'normal', and these authors acknowledge this in various ways, with one of the central aims of the text being 'to understand non-heteronormative practices in terms of their social, cultural, political, and historical contexts' (p. 10). Secondly, the influence of globalisation and migration has had a significant impact on non-western transgendered identities – this is particularly so in the Pacific, where the population is notably transitory. Editors Kalissa Alexeyeff and Niko Besnier are careful to make explicit the fact that 'foreign-influenced' instantiations of non-heteronormative identities and practices are not 'inauthentic'. The book is marked by a number of discussions in which more 'traditional' models of non-heteronormativity are contrasted with those which may be seen as more 'modern', but in all instances care is taken to ensure that the more 'traditional' model is not privileged as more 'authentic' by the respective authors (even if it is by those being discussed).

Rather than relying on the term 'transgender', in the introduction Besnier and Alexeyeff refer to the populations being discussed as 'non-heteronormative', and the various contributors do not always discuss practices that could be termed 'transgenderism'. Possibly as a result

of attempting to address the scope that this framework sets up, the introduction does feel somewhat short on content, and overly full of post-structuralist ‘buzzwords’. Specific gaps are identified by the editors – the literature is notably short on work that is grounded in Papua New Guinea (although this volume does have one chapter discussing Papua New Guinea); there is a dearth of material on FtM transgenderism and female same sex sexuality (briefly discussed in this volume); and those who are normatively gendered themselves but have a preference for sexual partners who are transgendered remain a lacunae in the field.

The book is divided into three sections. The first of these – ‘Historical transformations’ – comprises three chapters which focus on Tahiti (Deborah Elliston) and Samoa (Reevan Dolgoy and Penelope Schoeffel). Elliston and Dolgoy both focus on the ways in which global influences have resulted in shifts in expressions of transgenderism in the respective locales. There are, however, significant differences in the ways these processes have occurred. Dolgoy traces the genesis of contemporary fa’afafine identities at ‘Hollywood’, a tailor’s shop in Apia in the 1960s and 1970s. Rather than the confrontational politics that were evident in the western world at this time, the emergence of fa’afafine solidarity was very much based around a ‘gentle politics of recognition’, enacting identities that shifted in response to the influences of the west, but in a way that remained true to Samoan ideals of learning from one’s elders and a sociocentric understanding of the self. Elliston’s chapter, by contrast, discusses the tension between the Tahitian mahu – commonly seen as ‘indigenous’ and with identities that are more based in gendered behaviours than sexual desires – and raerae, whose presence in Tahiti only spans the last forty years, and whose identities are more fundamentally based in their desires for masculine men. Elliston grounds the emergence of raerae in the social and economic shifts of the 1960s, brought about by France’s involvement in nuclear testing in the islands. The juxtaposition of these two chapters belies the common assumption that transgenderism is the ‘same’ throughout the Pacific, and also addresses the ways in which commentators often present more modern instantiations of these identities as less ‘authentic’, somehow ‘tainted’ by western influences. Schoeffel’s piece focuses more on the representation of Samoan fa’afafine, illustrating the consequential nature of these representations with the example of medical anthropologist Carol Jenkins who wrote policy papers on culture, sexuality, and HIV in the Pacific based on the work of scholars who were more ‘expert’ in the area, which resulted in Jenkins replicating the ‘myth’ that fa’afafine are raised as girls because their families need more feminine labour. As Schoeffel observes in her critique of a range of such functionalist ‘explanations’ for fa’afafine’s existence, they are often based on ‘ideals’ rather than lived reality. In spite of this, researchers continue to seek explanations in the ‘functions’ that fa’afafine serve within their families or the wider culture.

The second section – ‘Performing gender’ – is focused specifically on what is stated as one of the book’s central aims, avoiding the reification of identities to rather discuss the ways in which people ‘do’ specific genders and/or sexualities in Tahiti and Bora Bora (Makiko Kuwahara), Samoa (Serge Tcherkézoff), Hawai’i (Linda L. Ikeda), Fiji (Geir Henning Presterudstuen) and the Marshall Islands (Greg Dvorak). These contributions tend to be the most theoretically developed. While they are at risk of traversing ground that has been well covered elsewhere, this is avoided by each adding something new to the discussions of their respective locales. Kuwahara moves the discussion started by Elliston beyond just Tahiti to include Bora Bora, where the understandings and reactions regarding mahu and raerae are somewhat different due to the differences in political and economic shifts between the two islands. Tcherkézoff discusses not just fa’afafine, but also the Samoan tomboys – those who are born girls but behave as ‘men’ in some aspects. Ikeda seeks to move away from the more ‘sensationalist’ aspects of māhūwahine in contemporary Hawai’i, instead providing insight

into how *māhūwahine* form the familial relationships – both biological and ‘constructed’ – that provide the foundations of their lives. Presterudstuen raises the issue of Fijian men whose self-perception may fit more closely with the ‘gay man’ of contemporary western societies, but who are levered by a range of factors into adopting the ‘transgenderism’ that is seen as more typical of the Pacific Islands, in this case the identity of *qauri*. While this pressure to conform to specific cultural norms is discussed both (briefly) elsewhere in this collection and in the wider literature, it is not a commonly acknowledged aspect of non-heteronormativity in Pacific cultures, and one that quite clearly belies the notion that these cultures are universally more ‘accepting’ of non-heteronormativity. Dvorak’s chapter is perhaps the most challenging in this section, presenting as he does an argument against prioritising the sexual element of homoerotic relations, and outlining how, in the Marshall Islands, the intensity of same-sex relationships is derived from other aspects, and (maybe) more often than not involves no sexual element at all. Dvorak also raises a question that is implicitly posed by the very existence of texts such as this – whether these discussions serve the interests of the communities from which they emerge, or rather the interests of ‘a Western audience preoccupied with its own, often Orientalist, desire to frame and categorize gender and sexuality’ (p. 186).

The third section – ‘Politics of the global’ – seems to be structured around interactions between instantiations of Pacific non-heteronormativity and western institutions – youth empowerment and sexuality programmes in Tonga (Mary K. Good); popular media in Aotearoa/New Zealand (Sarina Pearson); armed forces in Fiji (Teresia K. Teaiwa); HIV/AIDS programmes and gay rights advocacy in Fiji (Nicole George); and the law in Samoa and Tonga (Sue Farran) – the ‘institution’ being addressed in Christine Stewart’s chapter on Papua New Guinea is less easily identified, but appears to be western non-heteronormative identities. I found three of the chapters in this section particularly interesting. Pearson presents an unusual approach to examining the representation of transgenderism in Aotearoa/New Zealand television, utilising the lens of the Samoan tradition of *fale aitu*, and arguing that this Samoan model of humour has been influential in not only how instances of Samoan ‘cross dressing’ are presented on local television, but also in popular performances of transvestism by *palagi* comedians such as the Topp Twins. While I am not entirely convinced by her argument, her use of a Samoan model to analyse *palagi* texts (rather than the overwhelmingly more common reverse dynamic) is interesting, and a theoretical approach that is worth pursuing, particularly in contexts marked by high levels of Pacific migration. George’s chapter on the tensions between advocating the rights of non-heteronormative peoples versus a focus on health issues, particularly HIV/AIDS, makes some particularly salient points about how the discourses of agencies working in the Pacific can marginalise particular groups, both those who use more indigenous terms to identify themselves (and particularly those who are transgendered), and those who are not included in the ‘men who have sex with men’ category – particularly women. The issue of western style gay rights advocacy is also raised by Farran, whose observations regarding the applicability of this approach for the culturally specific *fa’afafine* and *fakaleiti* of Samoa and Tonga respectively loops back to Dolgoy’s suggestion that the ‘gentle politics of recognition’ (p. 71) exercised by *fa’afafine* in Samoa is more culturally appropriate.

At a general level, I have a couple of reservations about this collection. The introduction provides no explanation for the logic of the division of the book into three parts, and the sections are not individually introduced either, leaving the reader with only the section titles as clues, and not able to really understand how the respective chapters cohere until they have been read. Many of the chapters also felt theoretically thin – leaning on the ethnographic approach means many of these pieces are detailed and interesting descriptions which acknowledge the complexity and fluidity of those being written about, but avoid more theoretical analyses,

especially in the third section. Having said that, the writing is universally attentive to the subtleties and nuances of the processes, people, and cultures they discuss, taking care to avoid over-simplification or the inappropriate utilisation of western discursive frames. *Gender on the edge* thus represents an important addition to the field, and will be of interest to academics researching and/or teaching in gender, and to more 'lay' readers.

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