This is an uncomfortable read, not only because it reveals the depths of the United States and Japanese cover-up and collusion, but also because it humanizes the menacing ways that nuclear weapons destroy the fabric of life—social, economic, and cultural, as well as biological. The Marshallese people, who also experienced pervasive trauma because of the Bravo event, will find solidarity in a story that parallels their own in many ways. For the US public and all Pacific peoples, this book demonstrates why we all must demand greater accountability and transparency in order to address the full range of damages and injuries associated with colonial activities in the region.

HOLLY M BARKER
University of Washington


In his new book On the Edge of the Global: Modern Anxieties in a Pacific Island Nation, Niko Besnier explores the forms and workings of the “malaise of modernity” in Tonga (xiii). Specifically, he examines understandings of what “modernity is, how it should be made relevant locally, and how it should mesh with tradition” (xiv). The anxieties arise for modern Tongans from the challenges of being seen as “modern” while not being seen as turning one’s back on “tradition”: of constructing and enacting compromises that necessarily differ from one social context to another. For me, these tensions, anxieties, and ambiguities arise in sharpest relief in the chapter on pawnshops, where Tongans pawn koloa (highly valued traditional goods) for cash in order to participate in and consume modernity, before recovering the koloa to demonstrate that they continue to value and respect tradition.

Those who are familiar with Besnier’s work will recognize in this book familiar themes and material: chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6 deal with marketplaces, pawnshops, transgender beauty pageants, and beauty salons, respectively. This material has appeared in journals since 2002, but here much of it is refined and developed. The book is, however, much more than the sum of its parts: it contains two very good introductory chapters that frame, theorize, and contextualize the larger issues lying behind the sites of modernity on which the ethnography focuses, and a concluding chapter that, while short, provides a succinct summary of Besnier’s arguments.

On the Edge of the Global differs from other accounts of the encroachment of modernity in Pacific societies in many ways. First, it argues that modernity is not some external force visited on traditional society to its detriment, resulting in the progressive loss of its tradition, dignity, and cultural integrity. The book acknowledges the role of expanding global capitalism—specifically, a process
Immanuel Wallerstein has referred to as incorporation into the capitalist world-economy—in driving these transformations. But Besnier shows that Tongans define, engage with, and operate a form of Tongan capitalism rather than simply submitting to some deterministic global form. He argues that modernity is simultaneously product and producer of these forces for change. Tongans, and indeed others who confront modernity “at the edge,” are active agents in the negotiation and definition of modernity, actively embracing and engaging quite deliberately with the forces of modernity and giving them locally unique forms and meanings. This perspective highlights and elaborates Tongan agency in this process and shows how and why this makes Tongan forms of modernity unique.

Second, this work searches for the ways in which modernity is defined, embraced, and manipulated by Tongans not in its villages (where the contradictions might be more obvious) but rather in seven urban sites in which modernity is inscribed on objects and the body: flea markets, pawnshops, two quite different beauty contests, hair salons, a body-building gym, and evangelical churches. Besnier points out that rich insights can be gained from close scrutiny of seemingly trivial social sites and that much can be learned about Tonga, and societies like Tonga, “by searching for meaning in the day-to-day practices of ordinary or marginal people, their struggles to find material comfort and to define what comfort is, and their search for a modicum of dignity, perched as they are on the edge of the global, deeply enmeshed in capitalism and yet not quite of it” (xxi). If any proof of this proposition is needed, it is provided in a series of very rich micro-ethnographies, which are spelled out with an affection and dry humor that reflect Besnier’s four-decade-long engagement with Tongan society.

Third, while it is centrally ethnography, this work draws on a range of research strategies, and on theoretical paradigms—from Wallerstein’s world-systems theory, to Anthony Giddens’s models of capitalism, to Pierre Bourdieu’s models of practice, to semiotics—in order to provide a comprehensive discussion of the context of the processes at the center of the account. The operation of global capitalism and the ways this defines the properties of the capitalist world-system are central to the explanations of events in these ethnographic sites: while the emphasis in the ethnography is on the urban sites listed above, the influences of metropolitan capitals beyond Tonga and Tonga’s rural villages are invoked as drivers of what happens in these sites. The book is stronger and more coherent because of this willingness to use the operation of global capitalism to contextualize and link apparently unrelated sites and events. Balancing this macro-level discussion are some very detailed microanalyses of short passages of conversation, from which Besnier goes on to make elaborate linkages at all sorts of levels.

Many of the insights are very finely honed. For instance, Besnier presents brief but fascinating discussions of cultural and material forms that are embodied in the ways Tongans consume food in modern restaurants.
contexts while they simultaneously attend to traditional considerations of rank and style. He also presents vignettes showing the ways both traditional and emerging elites seek to combine “traditional” and “modern” in quite different forms even as they try to define for themselves how to judge what might be appropriate. In such instances I found myself wondering why I had not seen these things before! But in other cases I found the analysis so complex, so technical, and so nuanced that I wondered whether the Tongans at the center of the events in the sites could actually have the time or energy in their daily lives to engage at this level of complexity. Perhaps only anthropologists are interested and willing to spend the time connecting the dots in these pictures in endlessly different ways. Indeed, early in the book, Besnier signals the fact that his modeling and analyses will diverge in important ways from those favored by Tongan intellectuals. Yet, despite this latter concern, the analysis is intriguing and raises many interesting and valuable questions.

This well-written book sheds valuable insights not only on modern Tongan society, but also on issues and challenges that many modernizing societies face.

CLUNY MACPHERSON
Massey University, Auckland

*   *   *