

## Book and Media Reviews

---

*The Contemporary Pacific*, Volume 28, Number 1, 247-275  
© 2016 by University of Hawai'i Press

*Gender on the Edge: Transgender, Gay, and Other Pacific Islanders*, edited by Niko Besnier and Kalissa Alexeyeff. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2014. ISBN cloth 978-0-8248-3882-9; paper 978-0-8248-3883-6; vi + 408 pages, illustration, index, notes, references. Cloth, us\$65.00; paper, us\$35.00.

*Gender on the Edge: Transgender, Gay, and Other Pacific Islanders* is coedited by Niko Besnier, a frequent writer on queer Tongan fakaleiti, and Kalissa Alexeyeff, a writer on gender and attire in the Cook Islands. Their introductory essay takes the currently prevailing academic line that gender and sexuality have normative and nonnormative categories delimited by an edge of conflict, and in that sense they are taking a Western viewpoint on Pacific Islander cultures. They also point out that their collection takes part in a cross-national and cross-disciplinary dialog, perhaps white-washing or recreating delimitations in a Western model of the differences between and among various Pacific cultural histories, rooted in a time before current Western queer theories began. This is particularly an issue when writers define contemporary queer societies in the Pacific in relation to queer internationalism, rather than investigating these queer societies within their own historical matrix.

Such important critical contexts notwithstanding, *Gender on the Edge* is a welcome addition to the field of Queer Pacific studies. Despite the brief and perhaps exotic introductions of something approaching a Queer Pacific studies at academic conferences, I think that this is a field that

has produced too few publications and almost none in which indigenous queer writers are engaged in the dialog in a meaningful way. This book makes some attempt to bridge that gap, but even for writers who are indigenous but not queer, the results can be occasionally problematic, if only because the dialog has not gone round the table. Further publications in Queer Pacific studies are needed before the field can be said to have the explanatory power it deserves.

One essay that made the book definitely worth the read is Greg Dvorak's "Two Sea Turtles: Intimacy between Men in the Marshall Islands." Several writers in this book begin by raising the question that frames their categorizations, and as Dvorak writes, "Does this discussion matter more to the community in which it is situated, or to a Western audience preoccupied with its own, often Orientalist, desire to frame and categorize gender and sexuality?" (186). From this appropriate contextualizing of a Western queering of Pacific queer cultures, in his study of same-sex intimate relations in the Marshall Islands, Dvorak examines various contemporary interpretations within the Jerā community of men who have sexual relationships with men and the Kakōl community of men who live as women. Rather than finding a niche for Marshallese Jerā culture within Western modes, his essay examines the ways in which Jerā culture operates in conflict with and despite westernization and how it shapes that westernization. In other words, his work helps to define how a Western queering of Jerā culture is still westernization and how this elides history.

As a Samoan Fa'afafine writer and artist, I was, unfortunately, disappointed in the essays on Fa'afafine. I saw too few references to the growing body of work by Fa'afafine themselves or at least to works focusing on our critical viewpoints, beyond what one might term the more entertaining aspects. In her essay "Representing Fa'afafine: Sex, Socialization, and Gender Identity in Samoa," Penelope Schoeffel concludes, "Although many fa'afafine are considered to do feminine work better than girls and women, and may be admired for their skill, men who conform to cultural ideals of masculinity remain the ideal sons of Samoa" (87). There is in this conclusion a reductionist view that cannot see that Fa'afafine have agency within Samoan society and may not wish to take the place of "sons"—or even of "daughters." The ideal for Fa'afafine is as Fa'afafine, in childhood, education, work, and life.

With essays covering Queer Pacific lives from Tahiti, Sāmoa, Hawai'i, Fiji, Tonga, Aotearoa/New Zealand, the Marshall Islands, and Papua New Guinea, the volume goes a long way toward the continuing redefinition of contemporary structures of experience and the interpretive analysis of Queer Pacific lives. The volume makes visible the continuing necessity for new interventions by scholars whose work includes Queer Pacific Theory.

DAN TAULAPAPA MCMULLIN  
www.taulapapa.com

\* \* \*

*Buveurs de Kava*, by Patricia Siméoni and Vincent Lebot. Port Vila: Éditions Geo-Consulte, 2014. ISBN 978-2-9533362-3-8; 361 pages, maps, illustrations, figures, tables, index, bibliography. Cloth, US\$189.99.

At first glance, the format of *Buveurs de Kava* suggests a coffee-table publication—richly illustrated, glossy, big format, and broadly informative. It is thus a pleasant surprise to find that this turns out to be a book with a much larger ambition. The most comprehensive account of the kava plant and its cultural history to date, *Buveurs de Kava* draws together central cultural and historical materials for crucial aspects of Pacific history. Chapters take up kava's history and prehistory, its diffusion among the islands of the Pacific, a detailed picture of the commercial role kava now plays in its recent spread to Australia and Europe, and debates on kava's health benefits or use in medicine. In certain respects, the book is Vanuatu-centric, but this follows from the book's claim that Vanuatu has been the major center of domestication and export of the *Piper methysticum* plant throughout history. Many color photos from all over the Pacific beautifully demonstrate the centrality of the drink for the Pacific way of life. Moreover, Patricia Siméoni and Vincent Lebot also do their best for promoting a continuation of the enjoyment of this drink into the future. On the whole, their book constitutes an impressive synthesis of a century of research on "the Pacific drug."

The importance of kava as a cultural phenomenon was already outlined in W H R Rivers's monumen-