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*On the Edge of the Global: Modern Anxieties in a Pacific
Island Nation* by Niko Besnier (review)

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WRY helped set the stage for other significant campaigns—designed to end hunger, curtail torture, and encourage development—that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. Here, the author does not quite prove a strong connection between WRY and these other broadly humanitarian campaigns, but rather notes “similarities” (p. 234) or that WRY “coincided” with other efforts (p. 226).

Gatrell additionally could have been clearer on one other long-term question: Did WRY reshape the historical arc of refugee affairs in the post-1945 era? He notes that refugee affairs and politics changed fairly dramatically in the 1960s, with crises in sub-Saharan Africa and internally displaced persons becoming more central, for instance, than the issue of European refugees living in camps, which dominated in the previous decade. Moreover, in spite of WRY, an “absence of momentum” (p. 211) marked refugee aid efforts in the years that followed. But Gatrell’s careful narrative and textured analysis led this reviewer to wonder if WRY was but an energetic and brief moment in the global community’s efforts to solve the long-standing problem of refugees. In other words, despite the immense energy, it may well be that WRY did little to alter that longer historical arc.

Even so, Peter Gatrell’s *Free World?* is an invaluable addition to the historiography of refugee affairs, and his engaging analysis raises new questions and modes of inquiry that other scholars will be well served to consider. Quite simply, *Free World?* is now the standard account of World Refugee Year.

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On the Edge of the Global: Modern Anxieties in a Pacific Island Nation. By NIKO BESNIER. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2011. 328 pp. \$70.00 (cloth); \$22.95 (paper and e-book).

Besnier’s artfully woven, nuanced account of life in an age of global transformations and reconfigurations should be recognized as one of the finest ethnographic works on the contemporary Pacific or the everyday experience of globalization available. Based on personal observations and concerted fieldwork over the inspiring period of 1978–2008, this volume from one of the putative margins of the geographical imaginary illuminates contemporary Tongan lives and simultaneously offers a critique of the role of “imagination” in Western studies of non-Western

modernities. With deft control of critical theory, Besnier unwraps and exposes both the instability and purchase of such categories as globalization, modernity, and development. Whatever significance such ponderous terms carry, he notes, rests in their utility in making sense of real, present, grounded, navigated, contested, and ultimately embodied experiences in locally situated lives.

In a work ripe with fruitful insights, the way “social and cultural signs are assigned value in contested ways” (p. 26) emerges as the central focus in eight chapters and a conclusion. By examining seemingly ephemeral sites of social life and personhood—chapters bring the reader vibrantly into the milieu of Tongan pawnshops and secondhand goods shops, car dealerships, gyms, beauty salons, runways, and churches—Besnier offers one of the crispest imaginable reminders of anthropology’s necessary offering to the social sciences. Those who would understand the contemporary human condition must take the minutia of life into account. Analytical purchase on fundamental questions (What is the character of globalization, of modernity? Is it everywhere the same?) must attend to the details, the side paths as well as the main road, the contexts and co-texts of daily life as well as the front-page news and economic data. Because modernity is a set of cross-linked practices, a “contingent, tentative, and complicated category” (p. 102), “diffuse, shifting, ungrounded” (p. 124), daily details offer fine-grained entry into the larger complex issues at question, particularly since these practices are often contested in the very moments of their enactment. The heart of his inquiry thus rests on the understanding that “liminal sites on the geographical and social map,” for instance, often overlooked markets for goods and sites of services, “loom prominently in cultural life” (p. 102).

Chapters pursuing familiar lines of inquiry into the tense relationships between the global and the local—for instance, Tongan persons’ inhabitable desires for the latest consumer goods and the role of secondhand vendors in satisfying those desires, on the transformation of traditional cultural valuables into marketable products—are very interestingly complemented by uniquely engaging chapters on beauty pageants’ contestants and audiences, embodied practices revolving around hair, gym life and body sculpting, and church membership. Together all of these lines of inquiry carefully establish the lived experience of modernization, development, and negotiated cosmopolitan personhood. Because Besnier’s field data was gathered over a significant span of time, he is able to offer a sense of the materiality of cultural change, transformation, and flux. Moreover, he presents a sort of recursive pattern across chapters. Visible in his data, largely ethnographic, though

with a significant sensitivity to and investment in the methods and means of linguistic anthropology, the cultural practices that characterize globalization, modernity, and development are simultaneously corrosive and decompositional and restructuring and integrating. Early chapters establish a strong sense of breakdowns, Tonga's so-called 16/11 riots, dissent, disarray, and other sorts of moments that result in social fractures while later chapters reinforce a sense of how individuals are regularly involved in reestablishing social ties, reembedding bodies and selves in a robust, meaningful, everyday life way. In Tonga such processes seem to be always in conversation with one another, with suggestive applicability to other situations.

Across its chapters and playfully hinted at in its title, *On the Edge of the Global* is also in close conversation with the recently blooming literature on space and spatiality in anthropology and related fields. Besnier carefully attends to the spatially uncanny entanglements of contemporary lives, things, and ideas. He traces the curious flows of goods from elsewhere into Tongan shops, and secondary-goods shops, and the reverse flows of some traditional Tongan valuables, *koloa faka-Tonga*, such as barkcloth objets d'art and finely woven mats (p. 89). In one of my favorite anecdotes, he captures how locally ambiguous traditional crafts, in terms of quality, production, and authenticity, move from Tongan contexts to the gift shop of the National Museum of Ethnology in Osaka, Japan, where they take on an entirely different patina of significance. For Besnier such flows of goods offer traces of other circulations of analytical significance—ideas about selves and others that orient individuals to their bodies, communities, and their practices.

As in the anecdote where locally scarcely valuable not quite traditional tourist craftworks become containers for other sorts of meanings when encountered in the context of a Japanese museum, the result in Tonga and almost certainly across global spaces is a tremendous ambiguity about meaning, bodies, things, ways of life. For instance, attention to the hetero-normative and transgendered Miss Heilala and Miss Galaxy beauty contests captures the immense amount of body work and other contestations, with hair shape, including color and texture, fashion, and performance, and reveals fundamental tensions about being Tongan—quite aside from if in addition to issues of gender and sexuality. One might well ask—and some Tongans appear to be asking—has the seduction of the cosmopolitan or the modern compromised our bodies or our cultural identities? Certainly, the result is a heightened degree of anxiety about being in the world as local or universal (global) persons.

One of Besnier's contributions here is a study of cultural anxiety in

a globalizing age. Malaise, he notes, is not merely a state, but a process that bears down and a symptom. Its “workings” can be exposed and explored. In many of his sites, intimately personal desires for social mobility and recognition in an explicitly hierarchical social context appear to be at the root of a certain degree of the anxiety experienced by Tongans entangled in the push and pull of their increasingly globalized everyday. Some readers may find in this, too, a sense of discomfort. Though not all societies are chiefly, issues of status and social position have a certain familiarity across contexts. Modernity has long been a site of discontent. That the poet Auden’s “age of anxiety” has hardly diminished is a welcome finding, brilliantly treated by Besnier’s *On the Edge of the Global: Modern Anxieties in a Pacific Island Nation* even as one might choose to remain a skeptic about the idea that there was ever a pre-anxious age—either in the Tongan past or any past one cares to examine.

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