

Jürg Wassmann, ed., *Pacific Answers to Western Hegemony: Cultural Practices of Identity Construction*. Oxford: Berg, 1998. Pp. 449, bib., index. £44.99 cloth; £17.99 paperback.

*Reviewed by Laurence Marshall Carucci, Montana State University*

This volume follows the well-traveled path of works on identity construction in the “postmodern” Pacific with a number of insightful case studies. The collection is divided into four major segments, though the subdivisions are not highly integrated and, not uncommonly, the reader may wonder why a particular piece appears in the selected locale. In its major sections, the book flows from a consideration of how historical knowledge is constituted to the ways in which particular Pacific Islands peoples construct identities. Next comes a subsection that focuses in depth on Australia after *Mabo* (the 1992 legal decision that recognized the native land title of indigenous inhabitants), and a final pair of articles on Maori and Western Samoan questioning of democracy.

Wassmann’s introductory essay positions the contributions as part of the debate about identity construction and relations of power vis-à-vis the seemingly simultaneous moves toward globalization and fragmentation in the post-colonial era. At the state level, Wassmann discusses processes of internal cultural homogenization and creolization, the domination of new states by transnational elites, and other pluralistic factors that receive stress as concepts of custom and tradition become increasingly problematic. Wassmann suggests that capitalism has real universalizing effects that lead to commodification and Americanization and to the “socially detached individual, in danger of degenerating into an opportunistic and lonely ‘homo oeconomicus.’”

Equally, he sees the postmodern era as typified by a time-space compression that has expanded the boundaries of the Pacific and the border-crossing mobility of “its” inhabitants to create a new, multidimensional global space where “peripheries implode into the centers.” With such mobility, Wassmann suggests, ideas of the local must be rethought. In their place, more-flexible senses of habitat with meanings relevant to “spaces of experience” must replace reified analytic discourses of the past that referred to culturally fixed realities, which, at their worst, juxtaposed images of “homo primitivus” to “homo logicus” (pp. 7–10).

If this volume lacks a cohesive focus, it certainly contains many worthy chapters and ideas. Due to space constraints, I concentrate on a few. Friedman’s contribution, first of the set on how knowledge is constituted, suggests that the current controversies over ethnographic modes of knowing derive from differences in how elemental bits of knowledge are structured in relation to one another. Pacific ways of constructing knowledge, especially the Hawaiian ones he portrays, differ substantially from European/American modes of understanding. Friedman suggests that Hawaiians use embedding strategies to conjoin imagined universes and mythical pasts with social relational contexts in ways quite different from the Europeans or Americans, who see knowledge as a symbolic object to be fitted into a topographic or historic system.

Douglas’s chapter deals more directly with issues of identity and notions of narrative authority in relation to the construction of the past. She notes how the ethnographic record of New Caledonia was constructed in the European image, with practices of naming inscribing questionable continuities of group and place-based identity that are consistently contradicted by contrary notations of movement and fluidity in social practice. She argues cogently, and correctly I believe, for a reflexive, nonessentialized view of historical and cultural consciousness, though she does not fully explore the complementary idea that categorization itself is inherently and necessarily reifying.

Burt’s chapter addresses the issues of authorship and audience, exploring some of the rough terrain that separates the political agendas of anthropologists and European authors from those of local authors. Burt notes that all accounts are informed by political interests and that many so-called indigenous authors in fact represent a small urban elite who can do little other than further the “project inherited from their colonial predecessors” (p. 100). In contrast, he looks in modest detail at the local accounts of Alasa’a, a Kwara’ae elder writing his autobiographical account of family and clan for his own sons. The agendas here are very local, professing ancient claims of the Kwara’ae as first settlers on certain lands and positing genealogies as evidence for the inheritance of certain lands (and the illegitimacy of others’ claims to

the same lands). He notes that the challenge for future authors, anthropological and local, will be to sort through the differential effects that the immutable written histories have in relation to flexible oral texts, both in terms of the recollection and erasure of remembered events.

Stephenson's chapter in the identity construction section offers a nice example of how each of three Warengeme groups with flexible contours creates viable accounts of its own activities by twisting stories into viable rationalizations of these activities depending on differently valorized views of *kastom* or *komuniti*. While the reader is left wondering about the salience of the three factions among Warengeme villagers, this article offers a fine example of Burt's plea for local, politically contested accounts of identity in a postcolonial setting. Gustafsson's chapter analyzes the domain of sport and gambling as a site in which Usiai, Titan, and Matankor identities are constituted and perpetuated or, in contrast, where new configurations of identity are given a salient form in Manus Province, Papua New Guinea. The stark contrast between Gustafsson's characterization of traditional groups and recent dynamically constituted groups is perplexing, as are the well-worn images of sport as a warfare substitute. While one senses that the characterizations of the past are far too reified, the importance of sport in the current day is undeniable. Otto's chapter explores the way in which changes in resource management practices among the Lavongai and Tigak in northern New Ireland have an impact on constructions of identity. Although Otto's conceptualizations of traditional practice, including his portrayals of clan and matrilineage, seem too rigid and unidimensional, he clearly demonstrates how shifting patterns of marriage, residence, and relations of exchange correlate with alterations in landholding practices and claims about the ownership of marine resources to influence notions of identity at several different levels.

Tonkinson's article, which leads the section on Australian national identity, nicely situates the shifting historical constructions of sovereign nationhood for Australia as a whole as well as the issue of Aboriginal sovereignty within the nation-state. The *Mabo* decision to recognize Aboriginal rights to land serves as an important symbolic moment in this multifaceted negotiation that counterposes issues of indigenous rights to the British contention that at the time of settlement the Australian continent was *terra nullius*, that sets ahistoric racialist portrayals of social justice against historicized views of a wide array of local experiences by indigenous peoples that share little other than a common experience of oppression, and that challenges attempts to fashion unitary images of Aboriginal identity with a wide variety of local images and important feelings of autonomy. Tonkinson sees the outcome of this negotiation as part of an attempt by "the nation as a whole [to] reimagine itself via a[n innovative set of] myth-making processes" (p. 288). By viewing

*Mabo* as the nexus of the cultural and political dimensions of Aboriginality, these myth-making processes are nicely overviewed in this chapter.

The two articles of the final section discuss the complex issues surrounding democratization among Maori and Samoa residents. Both are provocative but, seeking closure, I overview only Tcherkézoff's discussion of Samoa. Tcherkézoff describes the seeming contradiction between the "aristocratic *matai* system" and the broadly shared Samoan contention that it is only through *matai* that democracy can be maintained. This, of course, is on account of the fact that Samoa is a place where all families are noble: where the principle of nobility does not exist in opposition to the peasantry. The flexibilities of the *matai* system are explored, noting its affinities with respect (as opposed) to rank, of common belonging rather than aristocracy, and of levels of participation in the sacred rather than clear-cut opposition to it. Within this frame, Tcherkézoff nicely situates the way in which ideas of universal suffrage and voting are discussed by Samoans in relation to local concepts of *matai*, togetherness, and processes of consensus building.

In brief, in spite of its lack of focus and beyond some amusing sections of uneven translation, *Pacific Answers to Western Hegemony* holds several gems for scholars interested in issues of history, identity, and social practice in the Pacific Islands today.