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Tryst Tropique: Pacific Texts, Modern Sexualities

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Abstract

Tryst Tropique questions some of the assumptions that have been made about the heterosexual trajectory described by European desire as it has informed literary, artistic and anthropological representation of the South Pacific. It reads a series of contact encounters and Pacific residencies for their unfolding of European sexual inscription and discovers their inevitable entanglement with problematics of homosexual definition.

This thesis arcs between two readings wherein the sexual conduct of Polynesian men both requires and escapes European definition. The first, which settles on the documents of Cook's third voyage, uses British indifference to Hawaiian sodomitical desire to help measure a representational space from whence the European homosexual will emerge (Chapter Two). The next reading considers the erotics of male visibility legible across a number of Marquesan contact texts including Herman Melville's *Typee* (Chapter Three). Chapter Four discovers that the suspicion of sodomitical misconduct which clouded the career of William Yate, an early nineteenth-century New Zealand missionary, continues to involve twentieth-century commentators in the interpretative dynamics of sexual entrapment. Chapter Five turns to Gauguin's Tahitian writings and paintings to engage with the place of ambivalence in contemporary analyses of colonial discourse. Chapter Six extends the parameters of the thesis in terms of gender and of geography, taking up the controversy generated by Derek Freeman around the early Samoan fieldwork of Margaret Mead. It argues that in the example of Mead's career, we can observe the way in which female sexuality acts as the cipher by which culture multiplies and maintains ignorances and knowledges across the discursive field of sex in both cosmopolitan and primitive locations. The final chapter, which analyses a contemporary documentary representation of Samoan *fa'afafine*, finds the pertinence or applicability of European sexual description to Polynesian behaviour again at stake, though now we find that the liberal gesture of cultural relativism is co-optable to a homophobia already drilled and proficient in erecting a difference without to forestall a difference within.

Reading against the grain of much postcolonial work on the South Pacific, *Tryst Tropique* finds that it is the male body—whether native or European—not the female, which provides the sexual vanishing point which structures many of these narratives. In each of these Pacific moments a privileged figuration occurs: the body which stands as a placemaker for erotic capacities—both indulged and forsworn—is indicatively male. These inscriptions of masculinity betray a certain amplifying anxiety; the discrepant sexual availabilities recorded in each text break with increasing urgency on the shore of heterosexual and homosexual definition. Even as these Pacific journal keepers, these writers and artists, map identity more and more ferociously onto the known grid of gender, it seems as if the horizon of sexual certainty further and further recedes.

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Table of Contents

List of Figures	v
Chapter One	
Introduction: South Pacific	1
Chapter Two	
Too Darn Hot: Sexual Encounter in Hawaii on Cook's Third Voyage	11
Chapter Three	
Sightlines: Marquesan Contact Erotics and Male Visibility	31
Chapter Four	
Sexual Entrapment: William Yate and the National Geographic	74
Chapter Five	
Tropical Rearwindow: Gauguin's <i>Manao Tupapau</i> and Primitivist Ambivalence	104
Chapter Six	
Academic Recognition: Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict and Sexual Secrecy	140
Chapter Seven	
Queens of Samoa: <i>Fa'afafine</i> and the Closeting of Homosexuality	164
Works Cited	196

List of Figures

1.1	William Minchin, <i>Governor Bligh under the Bed</i>	10
3.1	An Inhabitant of the Island of Nukahiwa	55
3.2	Several of the Principal Figures Used in Tattooing	58
3.3	Rear View of Young Inhabitant of Nukahiwa	60
3.4	Portrait of Jean Baptiste Cabris	62
4.1	Pierre and Gilles, <i>Saint Pierre Marie Chanel</i>	102
5.1	Paul Gauguin, <i>Lovers</i> ; fragment of <i>Manao Tupapau</i>	111
5.2	Édouard Manet, <i>Olympia</i>	121
5.3	Paul Gauguin, <i>Copy of Manet's Olympia</i>	123
5.4	Édouard Manet, <i>Olympia</i> ; Paul Gauguin, <i>Copy of Manet's Olympia</i>	125
5.5	Paul Gauguin, <i>Manao Tupapau</i>	128
5.6	Paul Gauguin, <i>Reclining Nude</i>	131
5.7	Paul Gauguin, <i>Self-Portrait with Hat</i> ; <i>Portrait of William Molard</i>	139
6.1	" <i>Telling Tales</i> ," <i>Samoans</i>	142
7.1	Title Frame from " <i>Fa'afafine: Queens of Samoa</i> "	169
7.2	Traditional Dance from " <i>Fa'afafine: Queens of Samoa</i> "	173
7.3	Karangahape Rd from " <i>Fa'afafine: Queens of Samoa</i> "	173
7.4	Karl Pulotu-Endemann from " <i>Fa'afafine: Queens of Samoa</i> "	174
7.5	Aiono Dr Fanafi Le Tagaloa from " <i>Fa'afafine: Queens of Samoa</i> "	174
7.6	Alex Futu from " <i>Fa'afafine: Queens of Samoa</i> "	177
7.7	Benji from " <i>Fa'afafine: Queens of Samoa</i> "	178

7.8	Boy in Doorway from “ <i>Fa’afafine: Queens of Samoa</i> ”	178
7.9	Direct Gaze from “ <i>Fa’afafine: Queens of Samoa</i> ”	181
7.10	Maternal Figure from “ <i>Fa’afafine: Queens of Samoa</i> ”	183
7.11	Living Alone from “ <i>Fa’afafine: Queens of Samoa</i> ”	187
7.12	Miss W[estern] S[amoa] Drag Queen from “ <i>Fa’afafine: Queens of Samoa</i> ”	189
7.13	Niko Uili and Flatmates from “ <i>Fa’afafine: Queens of Samoa</i> ”	191
7.14	Netball Training Session from “ <i>Fa’afafine: Queens of Samoa</i> ”	193