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 **Sexual Encounters: Pacific Texts, Modern Sexualities
(review)**

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Reviewed by:

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This book asks its readers to rethink the history of sexuality in the modern Pacific, primarily Polynesia. As Lee Wallace notes, from the beginnings of modern Pacific exploration in the late eighteenth century meetings with Pacific Islanders included sexual encounters, and, as she goes on to emphasize throughout the book, these have been overwhelmingly imagined as heterosexual encounters between European men and Polynesian women. Wallace's aim is to recover a history that has never been entirely invisible but, in her view, has been largely obscured: the male-male encounters embedded in island cultures, in the social order of European ships, and in the cross-cultural meetings of Europeans and islanders. The sources for this study are almost all published materials, most of them well known to historians of the Pacific, but the author also brings in contemporary theoretical and empirical studies in order to reveal the continuities between past and present.

The book's six chapters are essays on disparate themes (and sometimes disparate topics within each chapter) and cover different historical moments from the time of Captain Cook to the present. Chapter 1, "Pacific Texts, Modern Sexualities," reviews some of the more important recent theories of Pacific sexuality. Reflecting on the accounts of Cook's first voyage and Bougainville's rival French circumnavigation, both of which portray Tahiti as an island filled with amorous women beckoning to their European male visitors, she asks us to look for something more complicated; the missing dimension begins to open up in Captain Bligh's diary of the *Bounty* journey. Bligh investigates in detail the Tahitian *mahu*, the male figures who take their place among the women and are objects of male desire. At the same time, Wallace worries about the danger of dehistoricizing past sexual practices and definitions of gender by confusing them with twenty-first-century definitions of homosexuality and heterosexuality. Turning to the history of the conquistadors in the Americas, she urges us not to confuse

Amerindian male-male sexual relations at the time of the Spanish conquest with the modern definition of homosexuality. She continues this argument by commenting on Gilbert Herdt's studies of male-male sexual practices among the Sambians of New Guinea. Herdt has recently been accused of imposing Western categories on the Sambians, but Wallace emphasizes how difficult it is to disentangle them. Here and elsewhere she seeks to challenge the reader to think beyond simple definitions of sexuality, whether by assimilating Western and non-Western cultures too completely to one another or by pretending that one can completely hold them apart.

The second chapter returns to Cook, this time focusing on sexual encounters in Hawaii on his third voyage. It argues that commentators, including Marshall Sahlins and Cook's biographer, J. C. Beaglehole, have **[End Page 393]** focused almost exclusively on heterosexual encounters in Hawaii to the neglect of male-male encounters. Wallace argues that the Cook voyagers' "discovery" of native Hawaiian male same-sex practices significantly reshaped English attitudes toward sexuality. It is hard, however, to see what kind of reshaping took shape. What is more remarkable in the evidence put forth here is the imperturbability of the surgeon's mate on this voyage who, like Bligh later in Tahiti, conducted a rather detailed ethnographic investigation of male figures occupying a gender role that did not fit European conventions. This was a moment in the history of voyaging that was unusually free from the social and religious pieties that just a few decades later stifled frank reporting on Oceanian sexual practices.

There is already a different, more cautious tone in the accounts of the Marquesas Islands that form the subject of chapter 3. Adam Krusenstern, the captain of Russia's first voyage around the world, visited the Marquesan island of Nuku Hiva in May 1804 and alternated between banning the women ringing the ship and allowing them on board. The voyage naturalist, Georg Heinrich von Langsdorff, compared the beauty of the Marquesan men to the celebrated Apollo Belvedere. This is an...

Sexual Encounters: Pacific Texts, Modern Sexualities. By LEE WALLACE. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2003. Pp. xi + 175. \$45.00 (cloth); \$18.95 (paper).

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