



Situating Women: gender politics and circumstance in Fiji

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To cite this article: Teresia Teaiwa (2015) Situating Women: gender politics and circumstance in Fiji, *The Journal of Pacific History*, 50:1, 99-101, DOI: [10.1080/00223344.2014.1002965](https://doi.org/10.1080/00223344.2014.1002965)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00223344.2014.1002965>



Published online: 29 Jan 2015.



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In chapter 4 the authors make it clear that such depth of time and multiplicity of factors demand an ability to see the big picture, to be on top of a mass of data. Such big data can be handled, they argue, in two main ways – first by real interdisciplinary cooperation. Historians need to work with climate specialists and other earth scientists as well as computer programmers to assemble, codify and analyse big data. Second, we all need to be adept at using the many and constantly improving electronic tools such as Paper Machines, Zotero and Google Ngrams that provide a visual aspect that can generate new questions and connections. Many other such tools and many ways to learn to use these tools are available on the internet, mainly free. These, along with the increasing volume of sources now online and often easily searched, provide a formidable toolbox. We must remember that they are tools, however, not answers in themselves. They are ways and means, not ends.

Guldi and Armitage are not against micro-history. They see its value and its ability to make clear details that are important to reveal the constituents of the *longue durée* and to make such history all the more potent. But they believe that it is macro-history that will most restore the significance and power of the historian's voice.

For me, the most refreshing aspect of this small book is its unabashed belief in history's worth, the social role of the historian and the value of our work. It is a moral message – a call to action for the good of the world's people. It is almost evangelical in tone but convincingly underpinned by argument and extensive notes, including references to histories that adopt the *longue durée* or deep history approach.

In the Island Pacific, we do not possess the time depth of the written word of societies such as China, the Middle East, the Roman Empire or even Europe, but we have corpora of oral history, geology, archaeology, climatology, ethnobotany, linguistics and so on – all of which can show us large sweeps of time and the changes therein that made the Pacific the way it was long before literacy jumped ship as new people crept into the Great Ocean. If at least some of us take the *History Manifesto* to heart, I am sure deeper, longer and more socially significant histories of the Pacific World and worlds will emerge.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00223344.2015.1006550>

Situating Women: gender politics and circumstance in Fiji. By Nicole George. Canberra, ANU E Press, 2012. xiv + 263 pp., illus., maps, bibliog. ISBN 978-1-9221-4414-0 (ebook). <http://press.anu.edu.au/titles/situating-women/>. ISBN 978-1-922144-14-0 (pbk). A\$28.00.

Fiji has been a key focal point for women's activism in the Pacific for close to 40 years. So it is somewhat surprising that not much has been written assessing this important history. Annelise Riles's ethnography of Fiji-based national and regional women's NGOs' preparations for and performances at the 1995 UN conference on women in Beijing gave a cynical and disparaging account of rote-learned and regurgitated UN discourse (*The Network Inside Out*, 2001). But tied as it was to its particular ethnographic present, Riles's study failed to situate Beijing 1995 within a longer history of modern feminist activism in Fiji and the Pacific. Nicole George's book helpfully steps into the breach.

Situating Women traces the history of women's and feminist activism through the evolution of organisations such as the Soqosoqo Vakamarama, the National Council of Women, the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre (FWCC), the Fiji Women's Rights Movement (FWRM), Women's Action for Change (WAC), and fem'Link. The book attempts to convey some of the complex politics of race, ethnicity and culture that

have shaped the ability of women to engage in national and international forums of agenda-setting and decision-making. We learn about the early roles of expatriate white women such as Rene Derrick in legitimising a genteel form of organising through the Soqosoqo Vakamarama, and the later radicalising roles of white women such as Marjorie Stewart, Ruth Lechte and Anne Walker, who helped lead the YWCA, and unnamed others who founded the FWCC. In addition we learn about how various local women either policed or pushed boundaries of thinking and action: Adi Finau Tabakauco, Esiteri Kamikamica, Suliana Siwatibau, Taufa Vakatale, Vanessa Griffen, Claire Slatter, Adi Kuini Bavadra, Shamima Ali, Peni Moore, Imrana Jalal and Sharon Bhagwan Rolls among them. But the character that looms largest is the late Amelia Rokotuivuna, to whom the book is dedicated.

A key interlocutor for George during her research, Rokotuivuna had been identified as a leader as early as high school, while she was attending the elite Adi Cakobau School for Indigenous girls in the late 1950s and early 1960s. After attending university in the UK, though, it became apparent that her political sympathies and commitments would crystallise around challenging elitism, racism and social inequality. In 1962, prior to going to the UK, Rokotuivuna had begun working at the YWCA as a receptionist and coordinator of the Girls Clubs, and on her return she became involved with research and advocacy projects, took on the role of secretary of the 'Y' and eventually became the first local to be appointed either executive director (in 1972) or general secretary (in 1974). Over this period and along with the early expatriate coordinators, Ruth Lechte and Anne Walker, and other likeminded women, Rokotuivuna led the Fiji 'Y' through the most activist period of its history, when issues such as the common roll for voting in Fiji, employment rights for household workers, abortion rights and nuclear testing were raised with courage and conviction. Chapter 2 documents some of this exciting history. Disturbingly, some of the current feminist leaders in Fiji are ignorant or even dismissive of this past activism, as a later chapter of the book notes.

George was fortunate to interview both Rokotuivuna and Lechte before each of them passed on in 2005 and 2012 respectively. Her research has indeed captured a valuable range of generational, organisational and political perspectives with additional interviews of other women involved in the organisations listed above and more besides. Although the bibliography does not contain a full list of her interviews, George acknowledges insights she has gained from interviewing 'local religious leaders, government bureaucrats, parliamentarians, representatives of Fiji's law and justice sector, local and foreign-based aid industry participants, and local academics' (p. 12). Other sources that she drew on include the *Fiji Times* and *Daily Post* newspapers, the archives and minutes of the YWCA, and various published reports, papers and newsletters of national, regional and international organisations.

Given the title of her book, how George situates herself and the women she has written about is significant. Her fieldwork in Fiji in 2002 involved her working on a voluntary basis for one of the women's groups that she was studying; this allowed her to mediate her acknowledged 'outsider' status, although she admits being an outsider was sometimes a recommendation rather than an obstacle for potential research participants. The concept of 'situatedness' was helpful in that it allowed George to compare women's organisational activities over time and comparatively analyse women's motivations; it further allowed 'for Pacific women to feature as differentiated agents of history, rather than homogenous and passive observers (or even victims) of history' (p. 10). I would say these goals have certainly been achieved.

The book provides a comprehensive accounting of Fiji women's groups' engagements in the World YWCA, United Nations conferences on women from 1975 to 2000 and regional forums such as the South Pacific Commission (SPC) as well as other networks. George has captured multiple layers of influence both by and upon the thought and practice of Fiji women's NGOs through a methodical attention to national, international and regional developments, themes of collectivity, progressive ideas and transnationalism.

Annoyingly the print version of the book does not contain an index – although one presumes that if it has been published primarily as an ebook, an index might be redundant in

the age of searchable PDFs. Also, while George is on the whole fairly scrupulous about historical specificity, some perplexing vagueness occurs around dates in relation to Rokotuivuna's early days in the 'Y' (p. 43), which necessitated checking the obituaries by Narsey (2005) and Walker (2012), only to find that they did not agree.

The larger lesson is that this book is about extraordinary individuals who were too busy to undertake synthesising and analysing such a comprehensive account of their own movement because they had or have been working so hard on research and writing that would more directly better the conditions of others. It is no small irony that it has taken an 'outsider' to narrate the collective history of some of Fiji's most capable and articulate women. While George has done an admirable job, it would be a sad commentary on the state of historical curiosity about Fiji women if this were the only version ever to be written.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00223344.2014.1002965>

L'Etat au pays des merveilles: L'Etat et le projet étatique en Nouvelle-Calédonie. By Peter Lindenmann. Frankfurt am Main, Peter Lang, 2014. 642 pp., bibliog. ISBN 978-3-0343-1441-1. €112.00.

With a referendum on independence looming on the horizon, New Caledonia will undoubtedly prove to be one of the most watched parts of the Pacific. Historically, the archipelagic territory of France has suffered from a double neglect by political scholars. On the one hand, debates in France about the nation-state have generally ignored the role of France's colonial empire. On the other, despite having given New Caledonia considerable scrutiny, Pacific scholars have focused almost exclusively on the plight of the Kanak people against a seemingly intransigent French state. Targeting this gap, Peter Lindenmann's published doctoral thesis, *L'Etat au pays des merveilles* (the state in wonderland), provides an intriguing anthropological view of the 'state' in New Caledonia.

The principal aim of *L'Etat au pays des merveilles* is to understand the state through its manifold actors. Indeed this is one of the most revealing aspects of the book. The 'state' is understood not in monolithic terms but as a product of a complex network of actors. The book is therefore a sort of ethnology of the state, consisting of observations and interviews with individuals of various rank and station. The people interviewed include a fascinating array of characters: the local commandant of the gendarmerie, the administrative officer at the local *mairie* (townhall), chiefs, accountants, jurists and ordinary locals.

According to Lindenmann, the central concept of *le projet étatique*, which translates approximately as 'statehood' in English, refers to the ability of the state not only to exercise its control but also to impose its version of reality on its population. Lindenmann is concerned with the way in which state actors understand and carry out their roles, frequently challenging their roles' proscribed boundaries. Some of the most interesting observations are made concerning rather mundane and unspectacular events such as the *journée d'appel pour la défense* (National Defence Preparation Day), which requires all 16 year olds to undertake a day of civic education at their local military station; the enforcement of law and order in the tribal area at Pothé; and the payment of taxes. Importantly the book recognises that although the French state has been imposed on New Caledonia and is held up as a model for governance, the archipelago has a history of institutional ingenuity. The provincial governments are an often neglected example and are thankfully included in Lindenmann's work. The title of the book refers to the way the French state has been imposed, absorbed and contested, reflecting the broader struggle between the largely pro-independence Kanak population and those who