

Tom Boellstorff. *The Gay Archipelago: Sexuality and Nation in Indonesia*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005. 282 pages.

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Studies of the cultural expression and social enactments of nationhood in postcolonial Indonesia often find themselves, implicitly or otherwise, pitted against notions of the "inauthentic." Just as in the Western popular imagination there is a relentless search for "authentic" locales untouched by the co-evils of Westernization and globalization, so, too, in the anthropological literature on Indonesia an emphasis on difference has always served to deflect attention from forms of Indonesian culture that appear to derive from borrowing or appropriating Western sources. Writers whose concern is the nation and its culture often strive to articulate the "authenticity" of their material, knowing that apparently "Westernized" cultural expression inhabits a territory far removed from its presumed origins, but those writers often lack the theoretical means to underwrite what they instinctively know to be the case. In *The Gay Archipelago*, Tom Boellstorff describes his own response to this challenge, as he negotiated a way of conceptualizing the lives of the *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians he came to know in the course of research in a number of different locations across Indonesia. His thinking on the problem, which shapes the conceptual understandings that structure this book, goes well beyond the subject matter of the book itself. It opens up a way of thinking about the Indonesian nation and its culture that ranks as a major contribution to studies in this field.

The theoretical breakthrough comes about in Boellstorff's thinking through the implications of the extraordinary course of events that followed the framing of a 1996 draft law designed to ensure that all foreign films shown on Indonesian television would henceforth be dubbed in the Indonesian language. The goal of the legislation, introduced under presidential imprimatur, was to "help build Indonesian skills in society," but within a month of its drafting, the legislation became the subject of heated controversy. Significantly, and despite the circumstances of its introduction into the parliament, the bill became the first-ever piece of legislation passed by the national parliament to be refused presidential approval. Returned to parliament, the bill underwent a complete reversal, emerging in December 1997 as a law that forbade the dubbing of most foreign programs into Indonesian, precisely to ensure that Indonesian viewers did not confuse the cultural representation of the Other with what was authentically their own. For Boellstorff, the implications of these "dubbing" debates yielded a means of negotiating the impasse between two conflicting dominant understandings of the *gay* and *lesbi* subject positions he was encountering in his fieldwork. On the one hand was the notion of inauthenticity, the idea that his Indonesian friends and interlocutors were simply "mimicking the West," as the victims or puppets of globalization. On the other was a determined assertion of the authentic, the idea that *gay* and *lesbi* subject positions were a "vener over a deeper indigenoussness," and as such represented a tactical "queering" of global capitalism. Dissatisfied with both these positions, Boellstorff evolved the notion of "dubbing culture," in which "two elements are held together in productive tension without the

expectation that they will resolve into one—just as it is known from the outset that the speaker’s lips will never be in synch with the spoken world in a dubbed film” (p. 5).

The notion of “dubbing culture” enabled Boellstorff to move beyond the binarism of sameness and difference, but it also provided him with an alternative to what he terms “biogenetic (and, arguably, heteronormative) metaphors like hybridity, creolization, and diaspora, which imply prior unities and originary points of dispersion” (p. 5). It gives him a framework for describing *gay* and *lesbi* subject positions as Indonesian constructs (hence “*gay*,” like “*lesbi*,” is always italicized as an Indonesian word), while still recognizing that they are shaped (as is the dubbed soundtrack) “by images originating elsewhere” (p. 59). This means that in contrast to notions of borders and boundaries transgressed, his metaphors are of “blurring,” “borderlands inhabited,” and “archipelagos intertwined,” and of “collage” rather than “suture.” These metaphors are suggestive of indeterminacy and provisionality, but as they are elaborated through Boellstorff’s material, they do not manage to subvert completely the problem of authenticity: “Being *gay* and Indonesian is like hearing Tom Cruise ‘speak Indonesian’ through the magic of dubbing,” we read in the book’s final chapter. “It is self-evidently inauthentic—out of cultural joint—yet socially efficacious” (p. 217). Yet this “inauthentic,” in the sense of being out of cultural joint, does not preclude the reality of the dubbing culture as an “authentic” part of lived experience. In another context, Boellstorff suggests that “the power of the dub comes not by erasing authenticity but by inaugurating new authenticities not dependent on tradition or translation” (p. 84). The lack of synchronicity in the shifting interplay of cultures still produces a subject position that makes sense of the world that the subject—in this case the *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesian—inhabits. In that sense it becomes “authentic” culture.

There is a slight awkwardness and opacity about “dubbing culture” as terminology, and it is unlikely to displace the efficacy of concepts such as hybridity, creolization, and diaspora in contexts where definable cultural wholes clearly constitute the subjects of investigation. Yet it seems unquestionably right for Boellstorff’s material, and the concept, if not necessarily the term, should from here on have a central place in thinking and writing about a wide variety of enactments of national culture in modern Indonesia. *The Gay Archipelago* shows how it can be productive of further ways of seeing and reading that enrich the “anthropology of similitude” that Boellstorff sees as the necessary framework for studies that are concerned with the twin spheres of Indonesian nation and Indonesian culture. In his hands, this study of apparent sameness leads to a range of innovative concepts that help make sense of Boellstorff’s material, but at the same time reach beyond it, toward other possible areas of application and ways of understanding contemporary Indonesian lives and cultures.

One of these insights is Boellstorff’s notion of the “archipelagic self.” It comes about in an attempt to theorize the moment at which the Western gay anthropologist parts company with his Indonesian *gay* interlocutor, and turns initially on perceptions of heterosexual marriage and same-sex desire. For the gay Westerner, it comes as a surprise to find that very many *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians aspire to heterosexual marriages. Likewise, to the *gay* Indonesian, the revelation that a Western gay man may see marriage to a heterosexual woman as a betrayal of his (and her) sexual self may be something that is genuinely shocking. Boellstorff holds these mutually antagonistic

views in productive tension, showing how the *gay* and *lesbi* subject positions can be understood in relation to two dominant tropes within the national imaginary:

When a *gay* man turns to his lover in bed and tells him to marry, he is not confused about who he “really” is, nor is he internalizing homophobia or denying reality. He is expressing and perpetuating a subjectivity best thought of as archipelagic, rather than cosmopolitan, diasporic, or hybrid. [...] these subjectivities straddle a contradiction—not between “tradition” and “modernity,” but between two contradictory state rhetorics, the archipelago concept and the family principle. The first makes possible a subjectivity where the self does not have to be the same in all contexts. This renders thinkable a *gay* or *lesbi* self who is also “heterosexually” married. But the family principle constructs marriage as not only an alliance between families, but a totalizing conjugal relationship providing love, meaning, and purpose as well as sex, children, and a household—uniting the multifarious domains of modern life and engendering national recognition. (p. 202)

This same sense of placement between contradictory state rhetorics lies at the heart of a seminal—if at first sight somewhat cheeky—observation Boellstorff has also elaborated elsewhere, his suggestion that *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians “stand as the greatest success story of the postcolonial Indonesian state—the truest example of national subjectivities, irreducible to ethnicity, locality, or tradition.” At the same time, though, they are also “doomed to failure since they [...] are of the ‘archipelago’ but ultimately belong to no ‘island’ and thus do not ‘belong’” (p. 32). On the basis of his fieldwork data, Boellstorff argues that *gay* and *lesbi* subjectivities are conceived only within the framework of the nation, removed from the “ethnolocalities” that constitute an inevitable part of being Indonesian.

These lively and original conceptualizations that underlie Boellstorff’s text do not obscure the rich ethnography of *gay* and *lesbi* communities that is elaborated throughout the book. The nature of community life, language codes, sexual practices, and relationship types all figure in the discussion, as does the placement of the *gay* and *lesbi* categories against so-called “traditional” homosexualities (such as *bissu* and *warok*) and the familiar *waria* subject position. Boellstorff terms the former “ethnolocalized homosexual and transvestite professional” subject positions (necessarily abbreviated as “ETPs”), pointing out that it is wrong to describe them as “sexualities,” “since they are above all professions (usually involving sexual asceticism), not categories of selfhood organized around sexual desire” (p. 45). Meanwhile, the existence and widespread recognition of the *waria*, or male-to-female transvestite, accounts for important differences between *gay* and *lesbi* subject positions themselves. This is because the absence of any female analogue to *waria* at the time the *lesbi* subject position took shape in Indonesia meant that *lesbi*, unlike *gay*, encompasses also those persons born female yet believing themselves to have the “soul of a man,” who strive to be considered men in social terms (p. 159). In a possible contrast with Western homosexualities, Boellstorff suggests that the feminine *lesbi* woman (*cewek*) and the masculine *gay* man occupy a more subversive position in relation to dominant sex/gender regimes in Indonesia than do their *waria* and *tomboi* counterparts. This is because “their desire for the same’ transgresses the assumption that sexuality operates across a gendered divide” (p. 163).

Ultimately, Boellstorff's discussion is permeated by a moving sense of validation of the communities he is studying. The book concludes with a touching "postlude" that gives the last word to one of Boellstorff's counterparts, a *gay* HIV/AIDS activist from South Sulawesi, and his definition of culture and belonging. Anyone with a serious interest in Indonesian culture would do well to seek it out and read it for him or herself.