Samoan Queer Lives (2018)

Edited by Dan Taulapapa McMullin and Yuki Kihara

by Pauline de Souza

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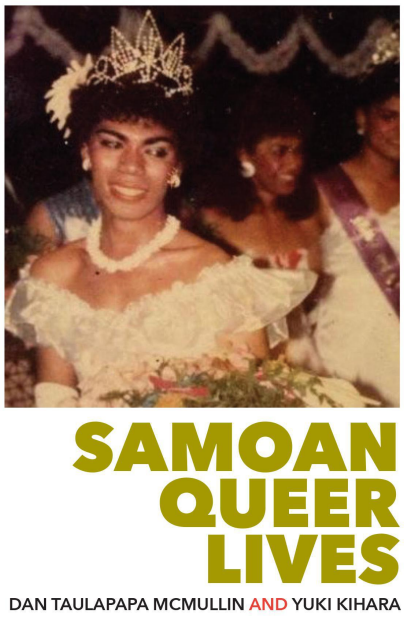
Published by New Zealand-based Little Island Press *in October 2018,* Samoan Queer Lives *is a collection of 14 personal stories from one of the world's unique indigenous queer cultures. The first of its kind, the book features pieces by fa'afafine, transgender and queer Samoans based in Sāmoa, Amerika Sāmoa, Australia, Aotearoa NZ, Hawai`i and USA. It is co-edited by New York-based artist and poet Dan Taulapapa McMullin and Samoan-New Zealand interdisciplinary artist Yuki Kihara.*

Yuki Kihara and Dan Taulapapa McMullin, the joint editors of *Sam oan Queer Lives* (2018), are artists with international reputations. Kihara's most recent group exhibition was the Royal Academy's 2018 *Oceania*, an exhibition celebrating the arrival of Captain Cook's first voyage to the Pacific Ocean. Meanwhile, Taulapapa McMullin performed Aue Away in 2017 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art which involved bodysuits of artificial flowers, handmade by the artist, and poetry read aloud from his book of poems, *Coconut Milk*. In that same year, Kihara received the Thonelaar van Raalte Research Fellowship Award from the National Museum of World Cultures in the Netherlands which she using over the three year period to investigate issues around Dutch colonialism in the Pacific regions.

That *Samoan Queer Lives* is an interdisciplinary publication is packed with purposeful punch. Both of the editors have an interdisciplinary approach, and consequently poets, playwrights, activists, artists, designers, carpenters, social workers, lawyers and school teachers are all featured within the book. Taulapapa McMullin's own films, poetry and visual art are linked to his activism for fa'afafine, people who embody both masculine and feminine gender traits in Samoan culture. Kihara is a visual artist, performer, curator and activist who creates narratives linked to Samoan culture, and in particular fa'afafine. Taulapapa McMullin's and Kihara's understanding of themselves as fa'afafine and as interdisciplinary artists resulted in their desire to produce this publication, thereby allowing a community of people to express the quintessence of a fa'afafine within a social, political and cultural context.

In the book, the editors use the term fa'afafine to describe a person who, from my understanding, is neither binary nor a third sex. It varies from case to case and is interchangeable, but it is important to comprehend that this makes the fa'afafine a distinct person in Samoan culture. For some time I have followed Kihara's exploration of this subject matter in the production of her artworks and writings such as the photographic series and performance *Fa'afafine: In the Manner of a Woman* (2004-2005) and *Taualuga: the Last Dance* (2006).



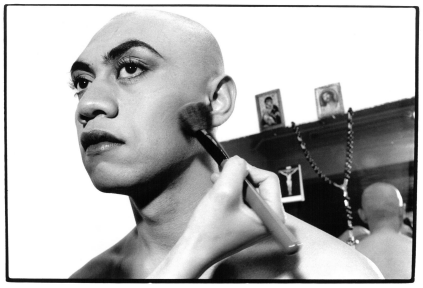
Samoan Queer Lives, published by Little Island Press, 2018. Photo by Yuki Kihara.



Yuki Kihara. Photo by Greg Semu.



Dan Taulapapa McMullin. Photo by Stephen Dunn.



Brian Fuata. Photo by Heidrun Lohr.



John La Farge, *Chiefs and Chiefesses Passing on Their Way to a Great Conference, Evening, Samoa*, 1891. Image courtesy of The Athenaeum, United States. This image is in the public domain.

Samoan Queer Lives looks at the experiences of fa'afafine living in Samoa and beyond over a period from the 1940s to present day. You can easily find Samoans living in the West and on other Pacific Islands: Taulapapa McMullin has travelled across the globe but is now living in the United States, and Kihara's regular travels across the world have resulted in her using New Zealand as a home base for a while before settling in Samoa.

Taulapapa McMullin's and Kihara's focus on fa'afafine has risen out of in-depth research and personal understanding. Both identify as fa'afafine and the knowledge of themselves as fa'afafine is essential to their cultural production and communication as

mixed-race Samoan people. Taulapapa McMullin is of Samoan and Jewish-Irish descent and Kihara, whose full name is Shigeyuki Kihara, has Samoan and Japanese heritage. Kihara introduced the fa'afafine to the United States in the 2008 exhibition *Shigeyuki Kihara: Living Photographs* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and Taulapapa McMullin wrote the essay 'Fa'afafine Notes: On Tagalo, Jesus and Nafauna' for the *Amerasia Journal* in 2011[01], explaining what it means to be fa'afafine, and the relationship between Western religion and Samoan culture.

Each chapter in *Samoan Queer Lives* is a new interview and features an image of that interviewee. The editors wanted to use a traditional Samoan way of collecting data for the publication. The gathering of information on the fa'afafine lives and processing of that information by the editors was done through the communal Samoan practice of talanoa (a form of community conversation that is informal but from the heart, as described by the editors), reinforcing the Fa'a Samoa (the Samoan way) – the Samoan customs and practices present in the interviews. For me, the photographs of the interviewees that accompany each interview served as a guide to the initial premise of the publication: inviting and opening up further discussions and research about fa'afafine.

The fourteen interviewees in the publication come from the visual arts, creative and literature sectors as well as legal, labour and education professions. Reading the interviews, it becomes clear that each interviewee has a strong commitment to activism for the fa'afafine cause, though this does not necessarily make them dissident when airing controversial subject matter. The interviewees are not intentionally out to cause offence, but if offence happens, the descriptions of the interviewees' experiences might encourage more readers to understand why this topic is personally important to them. Kihara and Taulapapa McMullin's lines of inquiry are focused on the body and its afflictions, the historical and the contemporary. Yet, the interviews do not follow a standard chronological order. Instead, the experiences and ages of the fa'afafine interviewed are intermingled throughout the publication. This makes the publication an interesting and dynamic read; I found myself paying attention to the existence, time and place of the interviewees. The first is Tuilagi Seiuli Ailani Allan Alo Va'ai, one of the oldest fa'afafine in the book. The

beginning of this interview starts with some immutable truth on the subject: “I’ve never really tried to be either a girl or a guy. I’ve always been me”[02]. This sentiment is echoed later in Jean Melesaine’s interview: “I was so lucky to have my name Jean; it’s such an asexual name”[03]. The interviews demonstrate the fa’afafine’s own interests and aspirations, and how they are determined to get on with their lives.



Memea Eleitino Maaelopa. Photo by Lana Shields.



Roger Stanley. Photo by Evotia Tamua.

The interviews provided limited information about the interviewees’ backgrounds, however I found myself wanting to know more, particularly as this was the first time I came across many of these fa’afafine. I consequently undertook my own research.

Shevon Solipo Kaio Matai, while alive, enjoyed dancing and fashion. Solipo Kaio Matai became a contestant in Queen of Queens in Hawai’i while studying for a Bachelor’s Degree in English Language. Tuilagia Seiuli Ailani Allan Alo Va’ai was an outstanding Samoan choreographer for theatre and dance. Unfortunately, Seiuli Ailani Allan Alo Va’ai did not live to see the publication of this book as he passed away on 27 June 2017. Brian Fuata, writer and performance artist, had multiple exhibitions at the Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane and performed the work *Unti*

tled (Ghost Machinery Refit/Letting go of the Sheet) in 2015 at the Chisenhale Gallery, London. Kiana Rivera is a young playwright whose play Puzzy had its world premiere at Kuma Kahua Theatre, Hawai'i in April 2017.

Jean Melesaine is a visual artist producing documentary photography and films. Melesaine's exhibition *Navigating Queer Pacific Islanders* was held at Galeria de La Raza, San Francisco in 2013. Melesaine received the Open Society Documentary Photography Award in 2014. The award, founded by the Open Society Foundations, promotes documentary photography for social change on a global scale.

It is clear that Kihara's and Taulapapa McMullin's focus is about advocating cultural and social justice, which the interviewees are all involved in throughout different ways, and this is the reason why they have been chosen for the publication.

What the interviews portray is that the interests, aspirations and self-determination of fa'afafine have suffered setbacks due to a multitude of reasons. There are political, social and cultural factors influencing their lives. The effects of colonialism from the past to the present is one of these factors: "Missionaries coming to Samoa and American Samoa were very concerned with outlawing any form of cohabitation, or relationships outside of marriage as within the church. This is reflected today in the current colonially[-]founded laws against sodomy and marriage equality"[04], Taulapapa McMullin writes in his introduction.

Family and community reactions to being a fa'afafine also caused problems for the majority of the people interviewed. There are astonishing and vivid descriptions of violent acts which, at times, can makes the Samoan family and communities appear harsh as well as intolerant. The violence that takes place in certain families is incredibly raw. Relationships are complicated and I suspect the editors wanted to reveal these intricacies. Families and communities attempt to change and mould fa'afafine into what is considered 'normal behaviour'. The need for normality or social acceptance appears to be ingrained by church doctrine as well as Samoan cultural expectations outside of the church. Often family members 'discipline' fa'afafine by beating them. Frequently, the

fa'afafine's families and communities tease them. As a reader, I found myself questioning the methods of discipline used in Samoan culture and the church's involvement in encouraging this violence. However, the fa'afafine challenge this discrimination they encounter.

In his interview, Memea Eleitino Ma'aelopa discusses his involvement with a number of communities during his career to help support his people. In another interview, Alex Su'a discovers his inner fighting spirit which he uses to research the fa'afafine way of life and demand justice. Su'a writes "I just realised; you don't have to be a lawyer to fight that. You can be any kind of profession, an artist or whatever, and you can still fight that"[05].



Alex Su'a. Photo by Evotia Tamua.



Iereneo Veavea. Photo by Jean Melesaite.

Kihara, Taulapapa McMullin and the interviewees do not shy away from informing the reader that the word fa'afafine is a part of their own terminology for how they want to see themselves. Kihara writes, "fa'afafine broadly understood in the Western interpretation as persons who are of transgender, intersexed and third sex, or gay, lesbian, bisexual or asexual"[06]. Kihara acknowledges the fa'afafine as a hot topic for Western society. Western writers, anthropologists and documentary filmmakers are accused of searching for a 'primitive' fa'afafine who can be

measured against Western civilisation. Taulapapa McMullin states, "The suppression of fa'afafine, tauatane, fa'atane, and fa'afatama reflects the influence of Western and monotheism on Samoan society"[07].

In the introduction, Taulapapa McMullin expands on the history of the word fa'afafine and its separate identity from Western society. He states clearly, "the saving grace for fa'afafine is that we are neither fafine (women-wives) nor tane (men-husbands)"[08]. In some of the interviews, even though there is support for LGBTQIA+ rights, the fa'afafine are identified as being separate from the Western definitions of LGBTQIA+. It comes as no surprise to find that fa'afafine want this separate definition of themselves. Following the works of Kihara and other Samoan artists, the use of particular references and topics has promoted tolerance to all LGBTQIA+ as well as establishing their separate identity as fa'afafine. I can understand how LGBTQIA+ groups might find this need for a separate identity as problematic, however the fa'afafine do need to address the discrimination faced by their own, separate communities while also supporting anti-discrimination towards non-heterosexual relationships at a bigger level. Firmly placed within a Samoan context, they question the cultural contradictory attitude aimed at them.

Samoan Queer Lives has been eleven years in the making. While in production, four of the interviewees passed away. Along with Solipo Kaio Matai and Seiuli Ailani Allan Alo Va'ai, Memea Eleitino Ma'aelopa and Tootooali'I Roger Stanley did not live to see the publication of this book. Roger Stanley was prominent in the Samoan Fa'afafine Association and sadly passed in 2017. Eleitino Ma'aelopa advocated equality and I later found out that he was a highly respected Elder of the Samoan community. He passed away on 24 March 2017. Their voices are essential to this publication as they help to add the historic context of the fa'afafine. Without their voices, the publication would lose its foundation.

By using the *talanoa* method, the editors allowed the interviewees to speak in a way that was familiar and comfortable for them. Thanks to a discussion I attended about the use of the Samoan language and other Pacific Island dialects organised by the MOKU Pacific HQ at Raven Row Gallery in London in October 2018, I am

aware that this way of speaking is a particular genre used in social situations in Samoan culture. For some people reading the interviews, they might assume the publication has problems with editing and translation because the language and way of speaking can look odd when transcribed. The use of *talanoa*, however, clearly places the fa'afafine's identity as Samoan. I also know that for some time now, Māori, Samoans and other Pacific Islanders have questioned the Western language used to describe them. The event at Raven Row was based on the discussion of Lana Lopesi's publication *False Divides* which started to explore new ways of using existing Pacific dialects without using English words. Even the word Pacific is seen as a colonial word to control their identity. Instead, the use of the word 'island' is presented as a new way to establish their identity locally and globally, along with their indigenous cultural heritage.

It would be appropriate to conclude here with Kihara's finishing note in *Samoan Queer Lives*: "As the topic of fa'afafine continues to gain momentum in international media and academic scholarship that too often deals with the enigmatic question 'What is a fa'afafine?, *Samoan Queer Lives* address[es] a more pertinent question: 'What is life?'"[09].

Footnotes

01. Dan Taulapapa McMullin, *Fa'afafine Notes: On Tagaloa, Jesus, and Nafanua*. Amerasia Journal: 2011, Vol. 37, No. 3, pp. 114-131.

02. Tuilagi Seiuli Ailani Allan Alo Va'ai in *Samoan Queer Lives*. p.15.

03. Jean Melesaine in *Samoan Queer Lives*. p.87.

04. Dan Taulapapa McMullin in *Samoan Queer Lives*. p.11.

05. Alex Su'a in *Samoan Queer Lives*. p.177.

06. Yuki Kihara in *Samoan Queer Lives*. p.2.

07. Dan Taulapapa McMullin in *Samoan Queer Lives*. p.11.

08. Dan Taulapapa McMullin in *Samoan Queer Lives*. p.11.

09. Yuki Kihara in *Samoan Queer Lives*. p.3.



Dan Taulapapa McMullin is an American Samoan artist, known for his poetry, visual art and film work that are centered around his indigenous Samoan heritage and his fa'afafine gender identity. McMullin has been creating literary and artistic works in a variety of styles for over 35 years and has received numerous awards, fellowships, and grants, including having his 2013 book *Coconut Milk* named one of the American Library Association's Over The Rainbow Top-Ten Books for 2013. In 2010 he was the recipient of the Arts & Humanities Award from the University of California at Irvine; in 2010, he won Best Short Film Award at The Honolulu Rainbow Film Festival, for his work *Sinalela*; and in 1997 was awarded the Poets & Writers Award from The Writer's Loft. Taulapapa McMullin now lives in Laguna, California and in Hudson, New York.



Yuki Kihara is an interdisciplinary artist of Japanese and Sāmoan descent. Working across a range of media including performance, lens-based media and sculpture, Kihara's research-based approach has led to a comprehensive body of work and curatorial practice that examines gender roles, consumerism, (mis)representation, and the past, present and future societal issues from an Indigenous perspective. Kihara lives and works in Sāmoa, where she has been based over the past 11 years.

Kihara’s works are in the permanent collections, among others, of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, British Museum, Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Arts and Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen. Her works have been presented at the Asia Pacific Triennale (2002 and 2015), Auckland Triennale; (2009), Sakahan Quinquennial (2013), Daegu Photo Biennale (2014), Honolulu Biennale (2017) Bangkok Art Biennale (2018) and Aichi Triennale (2022). Kihara has been appointed by the Arts Council of New Zealand Toi Aotearoa to represent New Zealand at the 59th Venice Biennale in 2022. Kihara is a research fellow at Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen. Kihara is represented by Milford Galleries Dunedin and Queenstown.



Pauline de Souza is a Senior Lecturer in the Fine Art Department at the University of East London. Her essay on Destruction and Reconstruction discussing the work of Phoebe Boswell, Inci Eviner and Chen I-Chun will be published in Third Text in 2019. She is founder and director of Diversity Art Forum that has being running from 2005. Diversity Art Forum has supported many projects such as London Open at the Whitechapel Gallery, Baltic Gallery of Contemporary Art in Newcastle, and international projects in Canada, Sweden and Chile.

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