

*Samoan Queer Lives*

By Dan Taulapapa McMullin and Yuki Kihara. Little Island Press, Auckland, 2018.

RRP: \$35 ISBN: 9781877484278

Reviewed by Seuta'afili Patrick S. Thomsen

*Fa'afafine* are a visible and significant presence in everyday Samoan life. However, stories written from a *fa'afafine* perspective are sorely lacking in both academic and general literature. Most texts written on *fa'afafine* have been penned by non-*fa'afafine* and Western researchers who have often theorized the existence and lived experiences of Samoa's most visible queer identity through Western, colonial eyes. *Samoan Queer Lives* aims to help remedy this by reclaiming this space through the careful documentation of the narratives of broadly defined queer Samoans from a transnational perspective.

The book opens with a brief foreword by Yuki Kihara, herself a passionate and well-known advocate for *fa'afafine*. Kihara challenges the Western centism that has tended to “distort and sensationalise *fa'afafine* lives.” In doing so, she lays down the theoretical and corrective contribution that the book offers, which is to provide a vehicle for *fa'afafine* and queer Samoans themselves to his(her)storicise their own narratives. In doing so, the voices of queer Samoans are able to be heard unsanitised for a brief, albeit long overdue, moment.

Next, Dan Taulapapa McMullin offers a short re-orienting to the literature written on *fa'afafine* in the past. Theorists such as Janet Mageo (among others) have offered interesting interpretations of *fa'afafine*, categorizing them as “transvestite men,” pointing to the lack of references to *fa'afafine* in the writings of the early Europeans to visit the Samoan archipelago as evidence that *fa'afafine* is a “recent” phenomenon. McMullin and Kihara both lay that myth to rest early on, citing the missionaries and colonialism as the forces responsible for the suppression of Samoan queer identities. Indeed, support for this explanation now exists in the emerging Samoan queer studies literature, with Joanna Schmidt's *Migrating Genders* (2016) a notable text. Also, a chapter published in Robert Tobin's 2015 book *Colonialism and Sexuality: German Perspectives on Samoa*, explains that *fa'afafine* did not go unnoticed by early German visitors to Samoa. However, the reluctance to centre *fa'afafine* in writings was a result of German desires to feminize and sexualize the Samoan body within a colonial framework that relied on constructs of Samoan submissiveness. This helps us to understand the true genealogical embeddedness of *fa'afafine* within Samoa's historical fabric, which elevates even further the importance of *Samoan Queer Lives* as a text.

*Samoan Queer Lives* documents the narratives of 14 queer Samoans who are spread across the Pacific Ocean. As such, the book covers a wide range of issues and themes that include the importance of family to experiences of social inclusion/exclusion, visibility, diaspora identities and cultural (dis)connectedness. One will not find a clean, linear progression to the book's theoretical or temporal development. What one will find, though, is a kaleidoscope of rich, detailed narratives whose interconnectedness spans transnational queer spaces, yet very much embeds itself in a Samoan context. A context which is cross-regional and trans-Pacific in the sense that Samoan culture, praxis and boundaries cannot be said to be fixed, even at a discursive level. *Samoan Queer Lives* offers a queer view on Samoan culture and context unlike any that has come before.

The late Allan Alo Vaai opens the collection of autobiographies, detailing their ascent to the position of one of Samoa's foremost choreographers. It was a journey that brought Allan into

contact with Epeli Hauofa, one of the Pacific's most beloved writers and thinkers in recent times. The fast and heady times of Resitara Apa's life is on display next, where "Tara," a child of one of Samoa's former high commissioner's to New Zealand, offers an important counterpoint to the oft-repeated story of familial rejection of a queer child. Tara's transnational narrative helps us to also understand how the concept and praxis of gender for *fa'afafine* can be modified by living in different countries and worlds. Brian Fuata's thrilling performance piece follows next. Fuata's contribution was commissioned by Urban Theatre Projects in Sydney and is confronting in the sense that it holds nothing back in exploring the complex nature of how *fa'afafine* are positioned in a myriad of relationships. No topic is taboo as Fuata's performance and language explore themes such as parent-child relationality, casual sex, identity, God and culture.

Matautia Phineas Hartson, who grew up in Auckland and Invercargill as an "effeminate" Samoan in the 1970s, presents their chapter next. The arc of Hartson's chapter is very much a story of becoming *fa'afafine*. Those interested in exploring the differences between gay, *fa'afafine* and transgender will find Hartson's chapter of particular interest. Having migrated to Australia later in life, training as and becoming a successful lawyer and entertainer, Hartson's story is rich in detail and complexity. Memea Eletino Ma'aelopa, a very well respected *fa'afafine* and elder in the New Zealand Samoan community, especially in Christchurch, is featured next. Memea's short chapter highlights *tautua* or service in the Samoan culture, in which *fa'afafine* are able to take leadership roles in their own right. A long-time advocate for Samoans and *fa'afafine* in New Zealand, many Samoans will be pleased to see Memea featured in this collection.

Shevon Solipo Kaio Matai takes us to Pago Pago next, where the former Miss Island Queen introduces us to the world of "Hollywood" and "Beverly Hills" in Samoa's eastern island group. Shevon's story is one of the most important in the book as it clearly anchors *fa'afafine* in a local Samoan context and space. Shevon's chapter orbits around her relationship with her father, whose acceptance Shevon seeks throughout her life. Those seeking to understand the difference between a *fa'afafine* experience on-island versus one off-island should pay close attention to Shevon's contribution.

Jean Melesaine's chapter which follows next opens the term queer Samoan beyond *fa'afafine* for the first time in the book. Growing up in California as part of the Samoan diaspora in the United States, Jean's story adds complexity where the intersection of class marginalization and cultural othering impacts their life as a lesbian daughter of a migrant dream. Her story carries a redemption arc to it, having spent time in jail before becoming a Pasifika queer activist in her own right. Sal Salamoana Tatupu Poloai, who now lives in American Samoa, brings into sharp relief the difficulty of embracing a *fa'afafine* or gay identity later in life, having fathered children as part of an earlier marriage. Sal's story of discovery will be in broad terms familiar to those in queer studies; however, the cultural specificity of his narrative provides a fresh take.

Kiana "Kiki" Rivera's play adds another string to the bow of the book's commentary by exploring the process of discovering same-sex attraction between women. The poetic depiction of modern day dating between the characters delivers some cringeworthy and beautiful one-liners. The imposition of Christianity to the lives of queer Pacific women is a carefully negotiated theme in this contribution as well. Isaako Si'u'uleo's chapter details the devastating impact of the 1964 All Hallows Parish fire on the Samoan community in San Francisco and the

Bay Area. Currently living in Seattle, Isaako's story of coming-out is also juxtaposed with his experiences of the HIV/AIDS crisis of the 80s and 90s.

The late Tootooalii Roger Stanley's contribution takes us back to Apia, where Tootooalii's piece helps to illuminate the differences between the lives of *fa'afafine* who grow up mostly "in town" as against those raised in rural villages with stricter adherence to Samoan social codes. Tootooalii Roger Stanley was also a key proponent of the movement that pushed for the reform of the Crime Ordinance Act in Samoa that outlawed men "impersonating" women—a law passed down from Samoa's New Zealand colonial administrators, which targeted *fa'afafine*. Much of the thrust that drove the reform came from the work of many *fa'afafine* inside and outside the Samoa Fa'afafine Association, of which Samoa's Prime Minister is the patron. This work is also covered by Alex Su'a in his chapter, who was also very vocal and played a key role in getting the amendments across the legislative line. Sua's chapter is also characterized by fight and tenacity in the face of much discrimination and abuse across his own personal story.

Taualeo'o Stephen Stehlin brings the book to a New Zealand context when he outlines his story of coming to terms with being gay and stuck between "two worlds" as a child of a mixed marriage. Taualeo'o is a well-known stalwart of Pacific television; his chapter provides unique insights into the struggles that Pacific people in public broadcasting in New Zealand face. Ireneuo Tauailauti Veavea completes the 14 chapter/autobiographies by sharing his story of growing up in a household affected by domestic violence, becoming a father, dating a younger man then helping to found UTOPIA, an organization dedicated to representing and advocating for Pasifika queer people on the West Coast of the United States. The fact that the book closes with Veavea's enthralling life story highlights the precarity and potential of alternative futurities that *fa'afafine* and Samoan queer identities share.

As a collection of autobiographies, *Samoan Queer Lives* functions much like a taster rather than an in-depth look at a bounded set of research questions/ideas/theorization. This is understandable: the text comes together after more than a decade of work, and thus there can sometimes be a feeling of stylistic disconnectedness between the pieces that make up the whole. However, each individual contribution is a *mea sina* (treasure) on its own, criss-crossing some heavy topics such as incest, sexual awakenings, rejection of the reification of cultural constructs around gender binaries set by the West, leading into questions about whether Samoan culture is as truly open to *fa'afafine* as many pundits have tried to argue. What is clear from *Samoan Queer Lives* is that multiple truths can exist at once: *fa'afafine* can find agency in certain situations and be the victims of severe systemic institutional discrimination and abuse simultaneously. All the while, emphasis needs to be placed on the fact that Queer Samoans *are* Samoan, just as much as they are queer, which produces a specific context in which they negotiate, story and live their lives.

Interestingly, the authors edit out the interviewer for the most part and use only the responses to construct most of the chapters. This was to ensure that the voices of the contributors can be heard directly. However, as the autobiographies are essentially a collection of interview transcripts published without background and context as to how each contribution came about, it was somewhat distracting to get through entire paragraphs before working out on your own what the question was that had been asked. Perhaps if the interview transcripts were kept whole it would have allowed readers to get a greater sense of context and evaluate the performative aspect of the interview process. However, this would have been more of an issue if the goal of

the book was to unify the generated data into a single argument, but this is not what the authors/editors had in mind. Their goal was clearly to present multiplicity, depth and range. To avoid essentialisms, singularities and boundedness in how we frame Samoan queer lives.

My only other note on *Samoan Queer Lives* is that the narratives documented here are nearly entirely from prominent, well-known *fa'afafine* and renowned queer Samoans. Thus, typifying their experiences as speaking for a wide range of *fa'afafine* and Samoan queer experiences cannot be assumed, something that, to their credit, the authors acknowledge. One should be careful to understand that *Samoan Queer Lives*, as rich and detailed as it is as a text, still carries with it a bias toward the narratives of *fa'afafine* and queer Samoans who are “successful” in their fields. Having said that, this work is an act of resistance. It challenges the prescriptive power of dominant mainstream discourses that paint queer Samoans predominantly as bounded victims. However, future work may wish to focus on the ways in which *fa'afafine* and queer Samoans without notoriety or relative fame are negotiating their everyday contexts and relationalities.

Students of gender, queer studies, New Zealand studies, Samoan studies, transnational/global studies, diaspora studies and Pacific studies will find *Samoan Queer Lives* particularly useful and interesting. It is a text that opens many possibilities for future research by queer Samoan scholars. For instance, it highlights a lack of work on the experiences of queer Pacific women, *fa'afatama* and lesbian Samoan women specifically. Although there are contributions from queer Samoan women, after reading *Samoan Queer Lives*, one cannot help but be drawn to the idea that these narratives deserve a book of their own in which complex questions around female queer identities in Samoan culture and context can be better explored.

Scholars interested in learning how to better theorize what *fa'afafine* are, and how to position them in relation to Western queer identification frameworks, will not find a quick solution to that question in this text either. As Kihara directs us in the foreword, the better question is “what is life?” Ultimately, that is what *Samoan Queer Lives* is: a celebration and recognition of the life histories of Samoan queer subjects; validating and adding complexity to the milieu of factors that form and are formed by a contemporary Samoan context, all the while embedded in a Samoan worldview of relationality in space and time that mixes the past, present and potentiality of the Samoan queer future.