

Dan Taulapapa McMullin, *Coconut Milk* (University of Arizona Press, 2013)

Samoan-American Dan Taulapapa McMullin is a poet and visual artist, who, while he now lives in upstate New York, spent significant time in both American Samoa and independent Samoa. His poetry is informed by the experience of being an immigrant to the States, but it also draws on his education studying avant-garde arts at CAL Arts under Laurie Anderson and John Cage. Such an education is not necessarily at odds with traditional Samoan thought and art though: 'The most avant-garde works I know of in poetry are the most traditional pre-colonial Samoan texts, whose ways of thought are at the leading edge of my consciousness as a writer.'¹

As one might expect from the title, McMullin's verse is rich: there's word play, an awareness of history, and a celebratory sense of the whole of life. Coconut milk is literally found in almost all Samoan food. It is the stuff of life, ever useful. It comes to stand for Samoan culture, and for McMullin, that is ever present, wherever he is.

Most of the poems in the book are organised into poetic sequences – 'Sa Moana', 'Turtle Island', 'Laguna Beach' and 'Fa'a Fafine' – and numbered. These sequences connect the poems, but they also stand alone; it is a loose organising principle rather than a definitive one.

The 'Fa'a Fafine' sequences *are* linked by their attention to queerness, in a range of manifestations. McMullin has stated in interview that *Coconut Milk* 'is also about my experience as a *fa'afafine* immigrant, a queer person from an Indigenous transgender culture living a gay man's life in American culture'.² *Fa'afafine* is a gender identity that has similar manifestations across Polynesian societies, though its expression, its reality, is limited outside of Samoa: 'Among the *fa'afafine* immigrants in the United States/ as children girls in Samoa/ as adults Gay American men, giving you/ this, the surface'.

McMullin tracks this in two definitive experiences. One is the experience of his mother dressing for work in San Pedro, California. After the smell of 'lipstick, nylons, and perfume coming around the door', his young self recalls: 'When she was ready/ she would ask me to zip up the back of her dress/ the journey of my life began there'. The other is in the home village on Tutu'ila, American Samoa, where, with his grandmother and great grandmother, he experienced the smells associated with the painting of tapa cloth, especially the dye 'o'a and the non-sticking agent *soga*. His practice as a painter is linked to his identification with these old women: 'Now working in oil paints the smell of the oils/ is pungent to remind me of fresh 'o'a and *soga*'. Their artistry is in a sense his, the experience ongoing in his life and practice: 'there is a day that never ends/ a small child and/ two old women'. His preparedness to see in his female line the antecedents for his own life and work is typical of *fa'afafine* identifications and roles in traditional and current Samoan life, though it is generally atypical of western male artists.

McMullin uses Samoan vocabulary at times, thereby creating a doubled audience: those who understand it and those who do not, but often he re-enacts his word play in English, so the effect is present in both languages. This is most vividly seen in 'Pray':

Pray for both Tuna and Fata the orators say
Talo lua Tuna ma Fata

¹ Craig Santos Perez. *New Oceania Poetry Interviews*. Essay Press, n.d.: 23.

<http://www.essaypress.org/ep-34/#1UXyEzMCekCHQV1y.99> Published online. Accessed 11 October 2015.

² Perez, 18.

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Play with both Tuna and Fata my boyfriend said
Taalo lua Tuna ma Fata

The English is simply repeated in Samoan, but the word play remains in the substitution of 'play' for 'pray', and in 'taalo' for 'talo'. The non-Samoan reader might feel alienated by the Samoan, but is in fact being offered the same effect. The poem goes on to recount a story that enacts this substitution. Tuna and Fata are legendary figures in Samoan history, as they saw off the Tongan rulers who dominated the islands for centuries. They stand for traditional Samoan pride and custom, which, since contact, has been overlaid with, and undermined by Christianity. It is something of a commonplace in Pacific Studies to note that Christianity has been indigenised at the same time as it has colonised, but nevertheless, much of the sexual acceptance and celebration of traditional life has been reversed by its presence. Depicting a young man who embodies contemporary ideals of manliness – he 'works the family plantation/ Captains rugby for the village team' – the speaker calls him 'my manamea': my darling, who brings *ufi* (yams) and *talo* (taro) 'Fresh baked from the farm in coconut milk', and with whom he shares 'vodka our 'ava' ('ava being Samoan for kava). Citing 1920s African-American blues, the speaker ends with his assertion of the pleasure of tradition, even if his version is not to be broadcast in the same way as that of others in post-missionised Samoa: 'Ufi and talo in coconut milk/ Ain't nobody's business/ but my own'. His is a suppressed pleasure, 'play' not 'pray', harking back to both former times and to the lived present. Coconut milk then comes to signify bodily play as well as the stuff of life, an essential for both life and living well and wholly.

There's a clear politics to the expression of sexuality here, but there's also a decolonising awareness in the collection, seen in poems about figures famous in relation to their time in Samoa. Robert Louis Stevenson is one, Margaret Mead another (both queered in challenging ways), but there's also critiques of academics and missionaries, with their claims to knowledge, and their assumption of authority over Pacific cultures. The church is once again notable in suppressing both culture and sexuality, as seen in 'Fa'a Fafine Poem Number Sixteen', about the former joyous sexual celebrations of the Poula, the night dance. There is a rejection of commodified Pacific culture, 'tiki kitsch', in 'Tiki Manifesto': 'Tiki mugs, tiki ashtrays, tiki trash cans, tiki kitsch cultures/ Tiki bars in Los Angeles, tiki porn theatre, tiki stores'. The enormity of this appropriation, its level of theft, is seen in the repeated lines: 'Tiki mug, tiki mug/ My face, my mother's face, my father's face, my sister's face/ Tiki mug, tiki mug'. Using Pacific islanders as a romantic backdrop 'to make customers feel white and beautiful' is contrasted with the serious neo-colonial predations still occurring in the region: protestors from Rapanui being shot down by Chilean soldiers, rape and murder in West Papua by the Indonesian military, and homelessness in Hawai'i, to name just some instances the poem mentions.

This collection is deceptively accessible, but it demands serious attention to the claims it makes for holistic life in the light of such predations. There's a celebratory aplomb to an account of the Sydney Gay Games, and the decision to make a mark, in true *fa'afafine* style, by taking a 'catwalk stroll/ in a big loop across the field' in front of cameras in full drag.

Mandy Treagus