



**NEW OCEANIA
POETRY INTERVIEWS**

**CURATED BY
CRAIG SANTOS PEREZ**

featuring
**AUDREY BROWN-PEREIRA
LEHUA M. TAITANO
DAN TAULAPAPA MCMULLIN**
with an afterword by
NO'U REVILLA





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#34

ESSAY PRESS LISTENING TOUR

As the Essay Press website re-launches, we have commissioned some of our favorite conveners of public discussions to curate conversation-based chapbooks. Overhearing such dialogues among poets, prose writers, critics and artists, we hope to re-envision how Essay can emulate and expand upon recent developments in trans-disciplinary small-press culture.

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Cover Image *Dancing Queen* by Dan
 Taulapapa McMullin, 2012
 oil paint on photograph collage

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INTRODUCTION

— Craig Santos Perez

Literary historians trace the origins of contemporary Pacific poetry to the 1960s and 1970s, when many Pacific islands were transformed by movements for demilitarization, cultural revitalization and political sovereignty. Pacific literature was a vital component of these movements because our stories offered a space to expose the injustices of colonialism, to celebrate the resilience of our peoples, and to advocate for a decolonized future.

During the last 50 years, there has been an eruption of anthologies, chapbooks and single-author collections of Pacific poetry published throughout the Pacific and the United States. These works have circulated in classrooms, bookstores and online; additionally, Pacific poets have themselves circulated their works via live performances in local and international venues.

The major themes of Pacific poetry include culture, identity, kinship, colonialism, tourism, religion, sexuality, gender, migration, militarism, urbanism, nature, environmental justice, politics, language, mixed-race heritage and more. Cutting across these themes are a range of diverse poetic styles, from free verse to sonnets, from the confessional to the documentary, from the postmodern to the lyric.

The three poets included in this set of interviews represent an avant-garde edge of Pacific poetry, and they each have recent publications: [A Bell Made of Stones](#), by Chamorro writer Lehua Taitano, [Coconut Milk](#), by Samoan writer Dan Taulapapa McMullin, and [passages in between i\(s\)lands](#), by Cook Islands Maori/Samoan writer Audrey Brown-Pereira. Because the experimental nature of their work often requires multiple readings and interpretations, these interviews aim to provide readers with background to the development, intentions and personalities of these poets and their work. The afterword is written by another talented poet, Hawaiian writer No‘u Revilla, who is herself an avant-garde written-word and performance poet, as well as a Pacific literature scholar.

After reading these interviews, I hope you will purchase these authors' books, and experience the dynamism and vibrancy of Pacific poetry and poetics.



Mana and Ea, Dan Taulapapa McMullin, 2012
oil paint on photograph collage

interview with **LEHUA TAITANO**

Craig Santos Perez: What is your “origin story” as a poet? When and why did you first start writing poetry?

Lehua Taitano: I started writing poetry as soon as I found out what poems were—around seven years old, probably. I have always been drawn to the spaces of poetry: visually, contextually. Poems were something I could tear out of a notebook and keep in my pocket. A small space I would try to fill with the most potent stuff I could think of. So I’m fairly certain that all of the poems I ever wrote as a young person were, expectedly, pretty awful. But that didn’t matter to me. I wasn’t writing poems for other people. I used them more to think about the world in a way that sounded beautiful to me. Because it was gratifying, fun. I think that’s still why I’m drawn to poetry.

I didn't intend to be a Poet, capital "P." I have only really started calling myself a poet recently, after I realized my first book was going to be a book of poetry. So far, I like it. I think it'll stick.

CSP: Who were your early writing influences when you were growing up? In high school? As an undergraduate?

LT: Since my family moved off-island right before I began elementary school, I began my education in the rural, white South. I was the only kid of color in my class, and was one of about three in the entire school. I didn't realize for many years that my education was exclusionary—that is, focused entirely on a white, conservative, patriot view of the South and America, and a pro-militarized view of the world. So my early writing influences were almost entirely white writers.

I knew that I was drawn to writing, to reading, to the world of story. So I read everything I could get my hands on, including every volume of the *Lexicon Universal Encyclopedia*, which my father bought from a traveling salesman. I started writing stories and poems early on, and I had a second-grade teacher, Mrs. Newman, who took an interest in me and helped put some of my stories into typed form. She helped me submit some to the children's magazine *Highlights*, but alas, "Rhonda Rabbit is Out of This

World" never saw publication, due to its enormity (12 typed pages).

Later, in high school, my reading education shifted, probably because I had entered a slightly more urban school setting, and so I was presented with African American literature choices in classes and libraries. To say that I was drawn to African American literature is understating what was really more of a clinging to. I was devastated as a child by the overtly racist, anti-black sentiment that was prevalent in my community (in fact even in my own home, coming from a racist father), and the reality of slavery and the black American experience resonated with something I could not yet articulate. There were simply no stories, no literature I had within my reach, that spoke to exactly my experience of racism as a brown island girl in the South, so I clung to the simulacra (as differently complicated as it was/is) of the black experience as something that approached my own.

I devoured Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, James Baldwin, Langston Hughes, Zora Neal Hurston, Richard Wright and the like. I continually sought out stories of black struggle, because the experience of reading them ignited something in me that I felt I knew. At the same time, I knew it wasn't my story and didn't want to claim it as such. In retrospect, I

believe it was my first experience of wanting to be in solidarity with other brown folks.

As an undergraduate, and with the advent of being able to access the Internet, I was able to broaden the search for literature that resonated with my experience. The more I searched, the more I was able to hone in on an Islander perspective, but it honestly wasn't until graduate school, which I started 10 years after undergrad, that I was able to read Chamoru literature. It was at that moment that I felt the depth and breadth of what I had been missing all along. Mind that this was only about five years ago, when I was 32.

CSP: Can you tell us about your experience in graduate school? How did it shape your writing? What was your thesis about?

LT: I had pretty naïve expectations when I began graduate school. That is, I had the hopes that the highest institutions of American education would be different than other institutions. I think it was the desire to disbelieve what I had long come to suspect, which is that the very idea of "American institution" is fundamentally based on the same ideals as American society, which is to say: primarily white-supremacist, genocidal, racist, homophobic, misogynistic, patriarchal and imperialistic. But

strong is the system that keeps even the people it oppresses and denies in doubt of its realness, right?

So I took the classes and read more white writers (nearly all the texts assigned were written by white men) and, by my own turns, started writing stories that were not mine. I wrote white characters whose lives centered upon white situations with white ideals. At some point in my first year, it finally occurred to me that I was unhappy with my stories, but even then I didn't know why. And then basically, in the middle of reading one of my own stories, I said out loud, "What the fuck am I doing?" and it was like a switch was thrown. My own revealing, a self-reckoning, my own Great Brown Epiphany.

So I started changing everything. Questioning why I was writing in the first place. What were my motives? Who was I writing for? What privileges had I been bringing to the table that I didn't recognize? My interrogation of writing self, in turn, began as an interrogation of form. I questioned the very literal white space I was typing on, transferred to the white page, 8.5 x 11. Stacks of white pages that had contained white themes and white characters, informed by white classmates and white teachers. That excluded my own identity.

I began writing stories that ran off the page, whose text printed beyond the margins. I wrote stories that

were only typed in the margins. I wrote stories that started on page 12, instead of page one. I wrote stories whose content said “I don’t care if you read this.” I wrote stories that called out white readers, as in “If you’re white and reading this, then...” This was all a very literal, very hit-you-over-the-head resistance to convention, I realize. But it fueled the idea for my first book, which some say is “experimental” or “visual” poetry. I think it’s just poetry. Just my take on an experience of writing through a fog and arriving someplace I actually meant to be. My thesis contained some of these ideas, these first attempts at disruption. It is a short fiction collection called *Sudden Fortune*.

CSP: Can you tell us about *appalachiapacific*, your award-winning chapbook of stories?

LT: *appalachiapacific* is basically a collection of short fiction I was working on in my first year of graduate school. The stories within are the first stories in which I began to address themes that pertain more to my identity and experiences, with characters who were more representative of me. The title piece is fairly emblematic of some of my own struggles with being a queer, mixed-race young woman in the South. Other pieces, like “Suit,” are my first attempts at writing stories that highlight minority groups who are often left out of mainstream American literature, something that I now honestly try to approach with

more respect and solidarity, which is to say—avoid doing from a first-person perspective.

For this project, I was happy to collaborate with three queer artists for the design of the book and author “photo.” Susan Reahard’s mixed-media imagery incorporates some of my own typewritten text (which appears later in *A Bell Made of Stones*) with her photography for the cover, while Lisa Jarrett is responsible for the overall graphic design and layout. Elisha Lim of *100 Butches* did the stellar illustration that serves as my author photo. It was and is really important for me to create work that can also showcase the artistic work of other queer/trans people of color whenever possible. I am very lucky to have been able to produce such an aesthetically beautiful book as a first chapbook.

CSP: Can you tell us about the origin and development of *A Bell Made of Stones*?

LT: Well, there’s an origin story for the idea behind ABMOS (I just made that a thing!) and an origin story about how the idea actually became a book. As to the former: I didn’t think anyone would believe it, so I craftily included it as the serial title poem. It’s all there—how the bell came to me and how the stone with tulip lips was found on a riverbank. Wasn’t it you that said rumors are the best poetry? This rumor, at least how it’s described in the book, is real.

As to the latter: the book began to take shape when I started using a typewriter to make the poems. The thing about typing things across margins (on a digital word processor) is that it's impossible. You'll always have a margin and will be limited to what a digital printer will print. That was interesting to me, so I decided to use a machine that I could have more freedom with. Once I started, I realized there was a visual element I could have more control over, and besides, it felt good. I mean, typewriters are fun. To punch down on a machine that impressed onto paper added a physical dimension to creating the work that I liked. The extemporaneous creation of verse in the midst of a rhythmic clacking also transformed the experience of writing. I felt much more like I was approaching a canvas than a page, and that was a level of freedom I had not yet experienced with poetry. The ironic thing is that, in order to reproduce the typewritten pages into book form, the whole manuscript got scanned and digitized, and so those margins came back. I have the originals and am looking to display them as visual art in a gallery space. I think they read very differently when presented as a grid.

CSP: In addition to your written work, you also sing, play ukulele and perform your work. Can you speak to the relationship between your poetry and music, and between the page and the stage?

LT: I am really new to music. Learning to play an instrument has been something I've longed to do for years but have had little success in achieving. I didn't have music education as a kid, and it had always felt to me like I'd been missing out on an entire other language. Two winters ago, I thought about turning to island instruments, and thought about buying an ukulele and giving it a try, when a friend said she had one she was willing to give me. So I've been teaching myself since then, and it brings so much joy and quality to my life that now it's hard to imagine when I couldn't play an instrument.

I love the ukulele for a lot of reasons—the first being that it has such a lovely sound (which is helpful for beginners), even if you don't know a lot about what you're doing. The range of sound that is possible with such a seemingly simple instrument is what really grabs me, though, and I feel like the ukulele makes sense in my hands and heart. Learning new things and overcoming fears is a passion of mine, and I think that singing in front of others has been a huge fear for me. My mother is an amazing singer and loves karaoke. She's the kind of person who knows no stranger, and she has ensnared many into singing at her karaoke parties with her charm and good nature. She has always wanted her kids to sing with her, and I've always been too shy. It is important to note that I also do not naturally have a great singing voice and would often, and do sometimes

still, sing off-key. But when your mother, who never requests much of you at all, asks you to sing, the answer, always, is: sing.

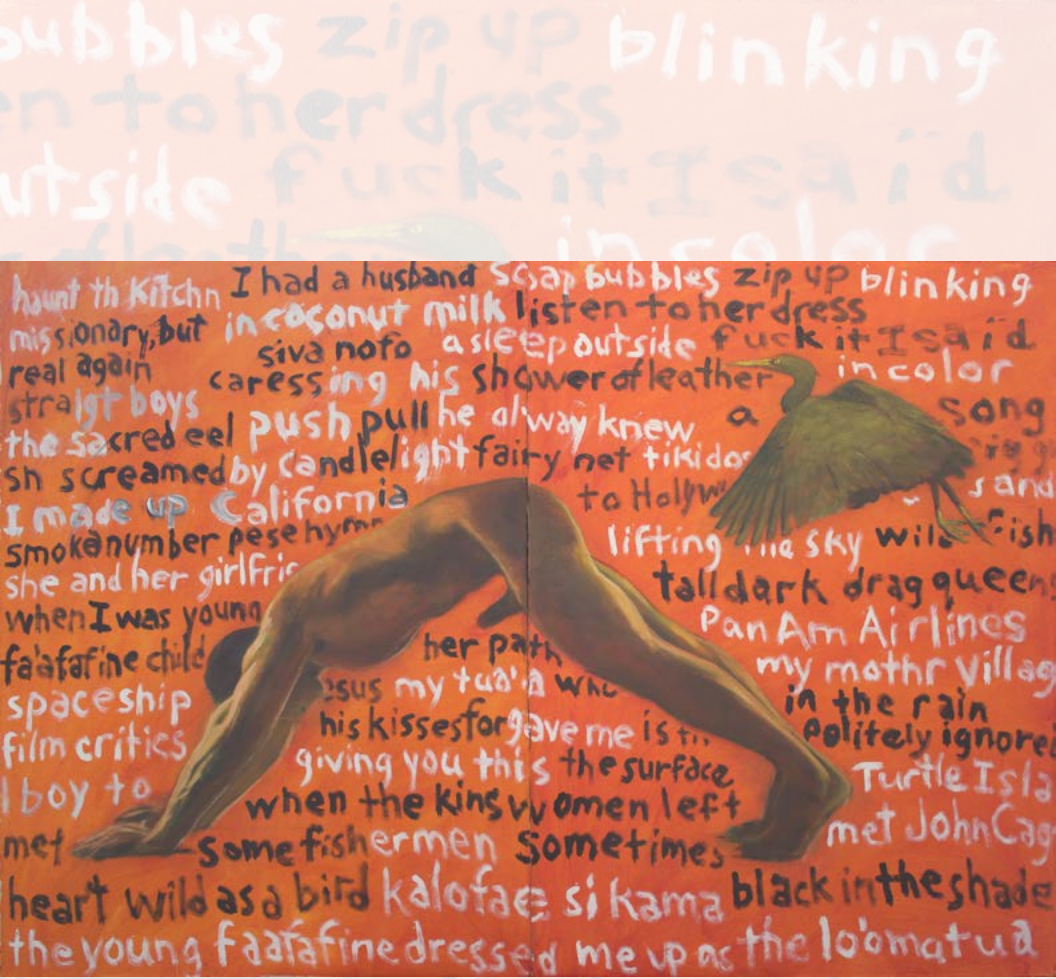
So my singular initial goal with the ukulele was to be able to play and sing one song, for my mother. The first song I learned was a bluegrass song—which sounds great on a tenor ukulele, and does something strangely beautiful for me that reflects my Pacific-Appalachian upbringing. As I met that first musical milestone, I found I actually really love to sing. And I've gotten better. Being able to hear the way a song should sound, as guided by the ukulele, is helping my voice tremendously.

As to the relationship between poetry and music: I think of the etymological history of the word "poet," and of historical references to poets as singers and composers. In Chamoru culture, poetry historically appears as chanting and song-making, a community-building practice. In bringing poetry to the stage, I certainly think it's important to bring some level of entertainment to a reading, which is really just performance of the written word. I have only recently begun to play and sing songs at poetry performances, and honestly, it makes me more terrified than I've ever been on stage. So I know I should probably keep doing it.

CSP: What are you working on next, in life and in poetry?

LT: In life, I am always working to grow as an artist and learner/teacher. I am always trying to learn patience and humility, and I think all of these things apply to poetry. Learning ukulele, becoming a more confident cyclist (I've worked on replacing gas miles with bicycle miles over the last year, and I'm up to about three thousand miles in 12 months), striving to be a generous and vulnerable partner, speaking up loudly for myself and others during moments of injustice—all of these apply to the poet I am hoping to become. In other words: approaching the things that are difficult, the things that are often frustratingly scary, and doing them anyway.

I am currently reworking a major edit of my second book of poetry, and have a series of drawings underway titled "Conversations With an Island," which I am excited to share, hopefully by year's end. I just stepped down from my money-making 9-5 job, and it feels...good. I am always seeking opportunities to teach, because that's where my true passion is. As ever, applications are in the mail.



Coconut Milk, Dan Taulapapa McMullin, 2015

interview with DAN TAULAPAPA MCMULLIN

Craig Santos Perez: What is your “origin story” as a poet? When and why did you first start writing poetry?

Dan Taulapapa McMullin: The first thing I remember writing was for White Sunday, the children’s holiday at churches in the islands of Samoa. My grandparents Nimarota and Sisipeni were the ministers for Malaeloa village. I may have just written down verses from the Tusi Pa’ia or Samoan Bible, but to me it felt like original writing. I remember feeling a connection between the scratching we did on small single sheets of lined newsprint type paper and the sewing of Bible verses my grandmother embroidered on pillow cases with images of flowers. For me, I suppose, writing was about a system of belief. The foundation of a belief system that continues in my feeling, though my belief in the narrative of the Bible no longer remains. I can still feel the sunlight of that place and those days, the warmth of the arms

of my kinswomen that I was enfolded in as a small child, the voices of all us children reciting in Samoan, and the sudden leap of men and women's voices in the choir like a great wave lifting us up, higher and higher.

When we returned to life in California, writing was an expression of American poetry in English. I remember being especially at some point interested in the writings of Chaucer and other early English poets, the kind of writing that was rural or about seafaring, narratives of the field, the forest and the sea. The first poem I wrote in elementary school was based on early English literature—there was even a deer with antlers in the poem. I loved stories about little girls in magic forests, and imagined myself as such a girl far away from everything, in a castle on an island in a dense forest in distant mountains. It's taken me a long time to realize what that poem meant. In fact I think I'm realizing it now as I write this. Would such a person have a voice? I think it was about voicelessness. Because to have a voice means to be heard by other voices that respond.

CSP: In addition to being a poet, you are also a renowned painter, sculptor and filmmaker (among other media). Can you share with us your origins as a visual artist?

DTM: My origins as a visual artist were really a slow-motion roller coaster of highs and lows that went on throughout my life to where I am now. It began in Samoa in childhood, continued in California and at Cal Arts in my youth, went on in an odd and fractured way in a lot of embarrassingly bad video work in television journalism in Los Angeles, and only seemed to fall into place in mid-life when I was in Samoa again and started painting again.

My relationship to art is connected to my difficult relations to education. When I was a child I had it good, as most of us do. My great grandmother Fa'asapa was wickedly funny and sweet. I'd hang out with her while she painted siapo, Samoan barkcloth, a mixture of monotype printing from wooden boards and free-hand painting of logologo (pronounced "loh-ngoh-loh-ngoh"), Pacific Islander patterns that have a language of their own. In Samoan "tusi" means both writing and painting, the act of making marks that have significant, but variable, meaning.

When I went to Cal Arts at age 19, I was in an alien environment, where I was the alien. I had some great teachers who were enlightening friends, and some difficult ones who proved to me that great artists are not always unprejudiced teachers. One of the difficult ones, who was my mentor and is now a famous conceptual artist, took exception when I

had an artistic disagreement with a fellow student who was also his girlfriend, and they took away my scholarship. I went home and had a kind of nervous breakdown, and eventually found a job in television in L.A.

Years later I was living in Samoa with some money I made writing a script, and I began painting. It was one of the most happy times of my life. I lived in a round Hobbit-like house in a little valley above Apia, and had beautiful lovers. I had long before turned away from urban conceptual art (having been in the thick of it in youth), and started painting in a rural figurative manner. Now I see that conceptual art informs my work in ways that are not always apparent to viewers. Critical narratives of art-making are not without superficial aspects, especially in regards to the ways in which manufacturing sculpture is a form of writing and painting that both expands and reduces the possibilities of meaning in art. My work is in the region where art and literature speak to each other in different languages about interwoven narratives.

From Samoa, I returned to California because my father was ill. I kept painting and went to school again, finished my long-unfinished BA and then MFA. During the MFA my father passed away. I met my

partner Stephen and we moved to a gay art town called Hudson, on the Hudson River in upstate New York. When my friends ask me what I'm doing, I say I'm a housewife and an artist. I'm writing this in my studio. With blank paper or canvas, the thing is to make those marks with all your mind and body and soul on the tip of a feather carrying a wisp of color.

CSP: Can you share with us the origins and development of your most recent book, *Coconut Milk*?

DTM: *Coconut Milk* is a collection of poems that are in a large part autobiographical. Coconut milk is used in much Samoan cooking. We call this form of cooking with coconut milk "fai'ai." There's "fai'ai fe'e," which is octopus in coconut milk, "fai'ai fa'i," which is green banana in coconut milk, and so on. Coconut milk is of course a metaphor for life, for the jetting spray of sea foam that covers the body of the poet on the shores of green mountains and deep blue sea, something like that. I feel like I'm going into my past when I read and perform the poems. They are in a way the essentialist view of my life, a shadow that I look back on surprised to see it there, and in reading I touch those moments and people again. *Coconut Milk* is about the Samoa Islands, where I spent part of my childhood and often have

lived my life since. It's where I've spent the best and the worst days of my life so far, but by far more the best days. When I'm particularly happy, as I am now with my partner Stephen in the small gay art town of Hudson in upstate New York, then I think, *Ah, this reminds me of Apia* (the main town in Samoa), or *This reminds me of Samoa, this time, the place, this person*. *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. These poems reflect greatly on my experience in the United States, they are in American English, with some Samoan language. They are influenced by Los Angeles, San Francisco, Orange County, California, by African American and Mexican American and Asian American cultures, by Hawai'i, which never really feels like America but like a strongly Americanized and Asianized Polynesia, by Minneapolis and the Midwest, and by Native America. And in my writing I'm influenced by Samoan forms of expression that are not immediately apparent to most readers, including Samoan storytelling or "fa'agogo," to fashion "fa'a" like a seabird "gogo" (pronounced "ngoh-ngoh") a story that travels from person to person and changes in the telling. I'm also influenced by Gertrude Stein, Marcel Proust, "the moderns," by John Cage and Laurie Anderson (who were my teachers at Cal Arts when I was a young

college student), by my Cal Arts alumnus Mike Kelley in Los Angeles, and by fellow Samoan writers and friends Sia Figiel and Albert Wendt. The reception of my poems and writing by the diaspora Samoan and Pacific Islander community was, it seemed, always a mixture of monotheistic religious disdain and surprised recognition, but rarely indifference. I think I can say that in some ways I've been the most avant-garde of Pacific Islander writers in my literary career, at least early on, but to me my writing and painting is just now coming into its own. I've rarely found publication support in my community, so I am deeply grateful to have had the pleasure of working with you, Craig and Brandy Nalani McDougall on *Nafanua*, a book I edited of Pacific poems and plays for Ala Press of Honolulu, and then *Coconut Milk*, for University of Arizona Press's Suntrack series of native writings, which you and Brandy edited with me. Writing and editing and publishing *Coconut Milk* was a kind of release, and since then my poems are finding new life. I'm researching what it means to be a painter and a poet, how narratives of sign and meaning, of color and rhythm, of humor and resonance, of repetition and folding and unfolding appear in my life's work.

CSP: Several of your poems in *Coconut Milk* are written in serial form. What draws you to this form? Is there a relation to fa'agogo?

DTM: I like the idea of lists and how they relate to poetry. This is something Gertrude Stein commented on once, and something that Ludwig Wittgenstein practiced—the numbering of compositions or thoughts or objects of thought. In Stein's case she would arbitrarily number scenes in her plays, with seeming randomness, so that the idea of sequence was made fun of, and in Wittgenstein's case the numbering of his thoughts in a book was similarly Cartesian. It was a screen through which ideas without any simple sequence passed visually. I studied with John Cage when I was young and I feel comfortable with the thought that things can be ordered in a certain way without revealing any meaning in the ordering, that meaning is something the reader or listener or viewer finds from that shared moment of artistic inspiration which is inexplicable. I was doing a reading with you and Sia Figiel at Pacific Voices in California, and for that I wrote Laguna Beach poems, with titles that I read as part of the performance: "Laguna Beach Poem Number One," "Laguna Beach Poem Number Two" and so on. I also had a series of pieces from an essay "Fa'afafine Notes" that I re-worked for *Coconut Milk* into brief

poems: "Fa'afafine Poem Number Twenty One," etc. This serial method became important to the book *Coconut Milk*.

I just finished a piece that is an essay and a poem called "100 Tiki Notes," which also utilizes numbering. It kind of reminds me of Samoan siapo painting, where there is free-hand painting over a wooden block print on barkcloth. Andy Warhol used a similar method of printing a Pop serial image on repeated canvases, then painting each one by hand. There is a structure and it is almost completely arbitrary. At the same time it provides a bed from which come wildflowers, weeds, flying insects, wandering birds, both images and sounds.

CSP: Earlier you mentioned writing about your experiences as a "fa'afafine immigrant, a queer person from an Indigenous transgender culture living a gay man's life in American culture." Your work has also been included in conversations/anthologies related to Indigenous queer identities (I'm thinking of your work in *Sovereign Erotics*). What role does poetry/literature have in articulating (or politically advocating for) these identities? Do you feel that your Pacific Islander and/or Samoan experience differs from other Indigenous peoples that you have engaged with?

DTM: I've been thinking about identity lately again in relation to post-identity politics and conceptual poetry. When I was young, conceptual art was the primary movement in avant-garde art. I just read an essay John Yau wrote where he justifiably attacked the notions of post-identity and conceptualism in poetry as a form of white supremacy, especially in terms of the "avant-garde." Capitulating to white supremacy would be fatal for any non-white artist or writer, so to attack white supremacy in art and poetry, or at least to be able to discuss it, is crucial, if only to say that. Whites are as incapable of making post-identity poems as non-whites are. And that's the interesting thing about it, whites and heterosexuals express white and heterosexual cultures, and oddly enough, white and heterosexual politics, and settlers express settler politics. Here in New York, I identify as Indigenous but I am not Lenape or Mahican; I identify as Samoan but I am not in Samoa; I identify as fa'afafine but I live the life of a gay American man; I attack white supremacy and Zionism but I am part Irish and Jewish, and my primary visual conversation is with European painting; I embrace Marxist deconstruction but my partner is a real-estate lawyer; I'm basically an atheist but I embrace the practice of mystical thinking or wandering, especially in the polytheistic foundations of Pacific Islander philosophies. 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. Almost all my readings (like Quentin Meillassoux's "After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency," which I am reading now), are only contingent to, only lead me back to the mysteries of Samoan patterns of thought—in other words, to my own questions, to my own questioning, to what Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Ta'isi Efi, in his recent writings on Samoan Indigenous knowledge, calls the whispers of Samoan culture. Identity is itself queer and it gets queerer all the time as we collide and words collide and mix and mingle. Should I just be with people who agree with me? No one agrees with me. I'm the most disagreeable person I know. Although I give much pleasantness, inside I'm questioning everything and everyone. I grew up in societies that not only didn't want me to exist, but in which I actually did not exist. I often feel more identity with the sparrows that hang around my studio windows for the seeds I leave on the ledge than for the global human machine that I seem to be a part of. So, to me, identity is an echo, a song, a recognition, and therefore dear to me. It is the fact that my body casts a shadow in the light, that it is warm in the darkness, that I have a voice that echoes on this page. But in a way, I cannot be

post-identity, because I never had one, at least not in “the contemporary.”

CSP: You have been involved with activism around various Pacific issues. Can you speak to the role/power of Pacific literature/art in political and social-justice movements?

DTM: Before my recent move to New York, when I was living in Laguna, California and working in my studio in downtown Los Angeles, I was in conversation with the owner of one of the top galleries in L.A., who was buying my work and considering it for exhibitions. The last body of work I did in that studio was a group of paintings responding to the conflict in West Papua, based on photographs of the rapes and murders of Indigenous West Papuans by the Indonesian military colonial dictatorship. My approach was to make these gruesome images as beautiful as I could, an ironic direction—which I based on Gauguin and tiki kitsch, and Alain Badiou’s concept of two worlds, the political image and non-political image-making.

My Los Angeles gallerist said the new paintings were great but he could not sell them. I think when I approach these images again, I will make them abstract. So basically, when making images that are a part of Indigenous sovereignty, one has to make

them for oneself and the community. It’s not going to be part of the market. I’m often struck by the insistence by internationally known conceptual artists that their work is political. When I look at the work it more often than not expresses a kind of watered-down internationalism that is neither Marxist nor Indigenous, just physically three-dimensional and abjectly philosophical. I’m also struck by the difference between the goals of the Left and the goals of Indigenous movements, which in many ways are opposed although they’re often presented as the same movement. The Left does not recognize genealogy and genealogical connection to land as a form of liberation, but the Indigenous sovereignty movement does. At the same time, the Right and especially the religious Right, does not regard our historical communal land systems or polytheistic cultural systems as human rights. I was part of an artists panel at a Pacific Islander contemporary art exhibition I curated in the Los Angeles area this year, and an African American man in the audience asked an artist in the show why his work was not political. The work in question was an ‘ie toga Samoan fine mat woven from American *Vogue* and *Artforum* magazine photo images, utilizing women’s work in a queering of a traditional form. The politics of the work, by Chuck Feesago, were in a sense interwoven with the understandings of

the audience, and its political meaning was both performative and metaphorical. Sometimes a work will speak to two audiences, a source audience and a receiving audience, and sometimes, in its fullest sense, to just one of these. When I first performed my poem “Tiki Manifesto,” I was told afterwards by Pacific Islanders that it made them cry to identify their anger at cultural appropriation and political assimilation, while non-Pacific Islanders expressed a sense of surprise at our subjectivity in relation to place. In “100 Tiki Notes,” my latest iteration of this theme, which is being published as a text in *American Quarterly*, and which I’m editing in a video version for another exhibition in Los Angeles, I am attempting to utilize what I hope are my strengths in history, image, humor, philosophy and narrative. Sometimes my poems and paintings seem to be about nothing at all, the light coming through the window and the way it shines on the objects on my workbench or my reflection on the glass, and sometimes they attempt to reach like a rope into that cold darkness colonialism consigns to us, both mentally and physically.

CSP: Can you share with us about what you are working on next? Poetry, prose, painting?

DTM: I’m starting a new body of work, a new collection of paintings, and like most things at the beginning it’s all over the place. My main issue as a painter is making a cohesive group of paintings and producing a lot of work in a timely fashion—this is the main critique I receive from gallerists, and so it’s something I struggle with, as I am with this newest collection. In this new work I’m looking at abstraction and figuration in a balance, in a language of my own, one that I’m inventing. That’s the immediate project. For the future: I’m applying now for support to develop a big work that includes narrative, painting, installation, a novel in visual form—but that’s on the horizon. Hopefully I get there!



Auntie, Dan Taulapapa McMullin, 2015
oil on paper

interview with **AUDREY BROWN-PEREIRA**

Craig Santos Perez: What is your “origin story” as a poet? When and why did you first start writing poetry?

Audrey Brown-Pereira: I grew up in South Auckland in Papatoetoe. My mum trained as a teacher in the Cook Islands but never went into teaching and migrated to New Zealand where she met my dad. My mum was the one who taught me to speak well, by breaking down words, and my dad would buy me colouring-in books and little reading books from the supermarket, with the gold and black spines. We always had a radio playing with music or horse racing and a television going on in the background. TV was the Internet with no search engine, where I learnt about medical conditions, and British and American accents. My parents worked in factories. That’s how I know about cars, paint, biscuits, payslips, redundancies and the benefit. These are the beginnings of my creative world.

School is what opened my world to writing and good teachers who encouraged me to write from primary (elementary) through to university. I always lived in my own little world, so writing was a perfect escape from reality or a means to reinvent things. That's why I love art, music and films, because there is rhythm, colour and voices and possibilities. Some people want to know everything in a technical manner, but for me I just want to enjoy the experience of seeing and hearing something that I instantly connect with, and with my writing do it in such a way that it's like a painting or a story or a play. That's why and how I write poetry.

CSP: Which poets and writers, what books inspired you during your school days?

ABP: I grew up in New Zealand, so a lot of writers that I was exposed to at a young age were writers like Joy Cowley, Tessa Duder, Patricia Grace and Witi Ihimaera. In primary (elementary) school a teacher would always read Roald Dahl books aloud to us, and in theme with *Revolting Rhymes* flick his finger at us after picking his nose, subconsciously I might add (I hope) while we were sitting cross-legged on the floor. A childhood memory is going to the movies to watch *The Silent One* by Joy Cowley with my mum and little sister. The film was set in Aitutaki where my mum is from (in the Cook Islands), so it was more watching to see all of my mum's family in the movie.

Art and music on the radio greatly influenced me. For an art example, Nigel Brown, whose work would be displayed in the Koru Lounge of the Domestic Airport, where as a teenage kitchen hand I would deliver sandwiches. Through art I was exposed to the work of Fatu Feu'u, John Pule and Lily Laita, as well as Robyn Kahukiwa. These gave me more ideas about possibilities, growing up an islander in Aotearoa.

In my senior high-school years I went to Epsom Girls Grammar School and can remember my seventh-form teacher, who had a passion for the written word, sharing *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys and *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* by Jeanette Winterson. I also remember going on a school outing to my first play and being awe-inspired by *Think of a Garden* by John Kneubuhl. This was such a powerful piece for me and the first time I could see myself in a story. Although I grew up in New Zealand I didn't read Albert Wendt and Alistair Te Ariki Campbell until I was at university, but I had seen the movie *Flying Fox in a Freedom Tree*. As a 13-year-old I thought Maori and Pacific Islanders were the majority ethnicity of New Zealand and was shocked to find out otherwise. Interesting how our world view is shaped by what we are exposed to.

CSP: Can you tell us about the development and publication of your first book, *Threads of Tivaevae*?

ABP: Most of *Threads* was written in the Cook Islands. After university I went to live and work (Cook Islands Foreign Affairs) in Rarotonga in 1997. Although I was born there I had only visited as a child on family holidays and we would go to the outer island of Aitutaki. My parents had built a house there.

I went to live in Rarotonga to know more about my birth mother, who was my dad's youngest half-sister (same mother different fathers). She died in a motorbike accident when she was 28. I reference her birth and death in my poems—she is often the voice in my poems. We never went to visit the Cook Islands until after she died so I don't remember ever meeting her. The short film "The Cat's Crying" is based on this.

Writing in Rarotonga was a creative breakthrough—to reinvent the way you do things, by sheer being in isolation. Away from everything. It is there that I found my niche of playing with words on the screen. It was liberating to finally feel I could do my own thing and didn't have to be like others. A lot of *Threads* is about searching for who my biological father is and knowing more about my mother, as well as being young and free.

I stayed in Rarotonga until I was posted to the Cook Islands High Commission in 2000 as a diplomat. I had always known Roni (Veronica Vaevae) since

university and wanted to do something with her again. The first time I met Roni I think was on a bus (or at a gallery opening). We were both from South Auckland at Auckland University—when I learnt what Roni did (she did film and video and new-media art at the Elam School of Fine Arts), I recited a poem to her, "The Rainbow," and said I wanted to make it into a film. We eventually did *The Rainbow* in 1997, which was an experimental piece based on the poem I had written. It was pretty out of it—it was the angry days of university!

Roni and I with a cousin, Catherine George, did a proposal to Creative New Zealand to do our book. We were exploring independent publishing, online publishing—just exploring a lot of possibilities. Hence we got NZ \$3,000 from Creative NZ. The name *Threads of Tivaevae: Kaleidskope of Kolours* was really because of who the three of us were, young vibrant Cook Island women using our talents collectively to get the book put together: Catherine the business side (she is now with Creative New Zealand as a Senior Adviser to Asia), Roni the visual/digital medium and me the words. Our *tivaevae* was our book. So it was a metaphor. When Cook Island women do a *tivaevae* (quilt) they can do it in a collective, where everyone has a role. The threads are the intricacies and I just love kaleidoscopes (the complexity and beauty of colour from different perspectives), which *tivaevae* are for me. *Tivaevae*

are a labour of love and a loved gift that is cherished and handed down to others.

I met our publisher Roger Steele of Steele Roberts at a ball hosted at Te Papa Museum, as you do in diplomatic circles. When I found out he was a publisher I said I had a manuscript and was seeking a publisher. And like all opportunities I followed it through. Roger is a passionate person, who gave us the freedom to do what we wanted. I have a lot of respect for him in terms of supporting poetry and art and the voices of so many writers.

This is the short version. Like all things you have to hustle and not be shy or scared of rejection. I had met the poet Gregory O'Brien who was very kind and generous in Wellington, and who had kindly given me some tips. I was also in Wellington at the same time as Teresia Teaiwa and she really opened the door to me at Victoria University and with her students. In fact I always remember doing a class session she organized with her students, where I was with the late Alistair Te Ariki Campbell, sharing poetry. These are the many things that happened for me in Wellington, which was a space to get things into action.

My creative process as a poet has always been in isolation. I like socializing with other people and enjoy the company of others, but my creativity, my

writing, is something I prefer to do by myself. The Internet and email thankfully have been a great way to connect people—globally— especially those like me living on an island. When I have done things it's not because other people did things. It's just something I wanted to do and tried to make it happen.

CSP: Can you tell us about one or two poems from *Threads of Tivaevae*?

ABP: On "Local tourist on a bus ride home":

I would often catch a bus home after work. It would leave anti-clockwise on the half hour and clockwise on the hour. Papa Joe was one of the bus drivers, and the bus would be filled with tourists, and locals getting home from work.

On the island of Rarotonga people are buried beside their family homes or they have family cemeteries with headstones. Life and death live side by side. So when you go on a bus it's all on the main road and can take up to 60 minutes or more to get round the whole island. You can see the sea and houses and trees and headstones that tell a story of someone who has since passed on.

My family has connections to the villages of Arorangi and Tupapa. My birth mother was brought up in

Tupapa and died in the village of Arorangi, where she had her own home. The painting that I have a picture of in *passages* is actually a painting of her, by the artist Edwin Shorter. I look a lot like my mother.

The poem I imagine is her talking to me—to look beyond what one sees. It's only in recent years that I have discovered that the voices I use in my poems are often a subconscious reference to my birth mother or someone passed on, like my grandmother.

There is reference in the poem to what people assume defines our identity and what it is to be Cook Island Maori. For me I don't speak Maori—very broken, I don't *tamure* or *ura* (*hula*) and I don't go to church. The poem is about identity that transcends these constructs, such as a spiritual connection to the land, the sea, the people who are your ancestors, who are buried but live with you. That's why in the poem I make reference to "seeing beyond" and using more than your eyes to see.

"Local tourist on a bus ride home" is a paradox of estrangement and belonging all rolled into one. But most of all it is about belonging and not being alone. An affirmation of love and connection and not being afraid of things you may not understand but that you innately connect with and that in turn—embrace you.

CSP: Can you share with us the origin and development of your newest book, *passages in between i(s)lands*?

ABP: The origin of *passages in between i(s)lands* was a long enduring affair. I decided to work on a new collection after the birth of my daughter in 2003, and it kind of evolved into a very long gestational period. The book had several names from "blind tongue" to "passages in between i(s)lands: a mix tape" to finally just *passages in between i(s)lands*. It is really a reflection of a journey and a play on words. Since writing my first book, *Threads of Tivaevae* I have moved from New Zealand to Samoa to the U.S. and back to Samoa. I was also lucky enough to take my children on our way back to Samoa through the Cook Islands, to where I was born and where many of my family still live and many have passed on and are buried. The use of "i(s)lands" enables it to be my journey, my observations, my imagination, my truth, my lies, and is powerful in the sense that I take ownership of who I am. But by the same contradiction, "I" is always in relation to others, like she is XYZ's daughter, granddaughter, mother, wife, sister, cousin etc. etc...there is more "we" than "I" being from and living in the Pacific.

Then as the project grew or the right opportunity came I shared a few pieces here and there. Networking, technology and the support of others

behind the scenes have been critical, especially when you live on a small island, where you need to connect with others to share your work. The anthology *Mauri Ola* and the online magazine *Trout* have been important, as well as the *Hawai'i Review*, to enhance a connection to a wider audience beyond where you live. Poetry Parnassus was also a major highlight of seeing things and connecting in person with other poets, on a global scale, and a good way of putting passages on a global platform.

CSP: Can you tell us about one or two poems from *passages in between i(s)lands*?

ABP: On "living on north star watching hbo on waitangi day in obamaland":

This poem was written when we were living in northern Virginia. We lived in the States from 2009 to 2011 for my husband's work. It was something that I had never imagined I would do—live in the U.S. with my family. I had grown up with America on the radio, television, in the movies and the news, but never thought I would live there. I grew up watching *Roots* and *Kunta Kinte*, Eddie Murphy, Whoopi Goldberg and of course movies like *Rocky* and *The Godfather*. But the poem was a reconciliation of being a "kiwi." Although I grew up in New Zealand, as an adult I have always considered myself a Cook Islander/Samoan raised in New Zealand—a citizen but not

a "kiwi." So this was an important poem or turning point that acknowledges my identity as "kiwi made" for export. Growing up in New Zealand has indeed shaped my experience and identity. The irony is it was watching the New Zealand comedy *Flight of the Conchords* on HBO in the U.S. that made me realize the accents, quirky humour and can-do attitude (anywhere in the world) are very much part of what I think is a kiwi ethos for a country that has a relatively small population. Also the egalitarian sense of New Zealand of when I grew up, where anything is possible: you don't have to come from an elite family to achieve and be somebody.

That's why being "in-between" is something that resonates for me. The poem also comes to terms with why I am an outsider living in the Cook Islands and Samoa because I am different based on my own upbringing and experiences.

In the poem I make reference to Cook Island food that my mother would make for special occasions growing up: homogenized (a term you hardly hear anymore) milk, and the kiwi itself—a reference to my imagination, which is "far from flightless."

On "baby girl":

This poem is about the tsunami experienced in Samoa on September 29, 2009. My youngest was

less than three months old when it happened. We are used to earthquakes, living in Samoa, but this one was long so my husband made us run for the car and drive to higher ground.

Before the tsunami happened, where we lived at the time the building next to us had what appeared to be a “shrine,” which had appeared “out of the blue.” People would visit it and pray. It was quite something at the time, where you had your believers and cynics—but nonetheless people visited it in droves. In hindsight some saw this as a “sign” of something to happen.

What is described in the poem is my experience. We had had several national drills before on what to do in the case of a tsunami and where to go, which at the time seemed to be a hassle. But when the earthquake happened that led to the tsunami, people were in disbelief. Apia the capital was kept updated initially through the radio, with people calling into the radio station to let them know what had happened of the tsunami and the loss of life on the other side of the island southwest. It was absolute shock and disbelief that this happened.

We were waiting up the hill by the hospital, with the police, ambulance and fire engines rushing past to get to the affected side of the island, which is over an hour’s drive away.

The reference to “baby girl” is also a reflection of the vulnerability of innocence of a newborn, and this chaos of nature and superstition colliding. The baby crying, not wanting to eat. The person sharing the poem being scared of the ocean, the sea, because now there is an awareness of what can happen—with the taking of life, the last breath. The tsunami is referred to as being selfish and hungry and greedy.

CSP: What are you working on next?

ABP: I’ve been thinking about writing a short novel about growing up in New Zealand. In recent times I have realized my kids have no idea what it was like, growing up working-class as a minority. They are kids growing up in Samoa, where they are the majority and there is a very strong sense of identity. At this point it will be semi-biographical. The project is something I have been thinking about for a while. It does not have a name yet. I see this in the long term becoming a film and always have a picture of how it will open. That’s the vision for now and something I have had in my head for many years. With my mother’s illness (cancer) and having gone back home (New Zealand) more frequently in recent times, it makes this project a way of writing something that can be a gift to my parents and my sisters.

Another project I have been thinking about is portraits of different people but using poetry,

instead of a painting or a photograph—but this is something that will take its own shape. So it will be pictures of different people but as poems in another collection of poetry.

These projects are ideas at the conceptual stage, which is exciting and scary at the same time. So let's watch this space.

Another personal project that I have to move on is my master's thesis in development studies, which I have put on the back burner. I was originally looking at the green economy but am now thinking about Pacific regionalism: what does it mean? But we will just wait and see.



Tiki, Dan Taulapapa McMullin, 2012
photograph

AFTERWORD

— No‘u Revilla

As a Kanaka Maoli and Tahitian woman descended from mo‘o, or reptilian water deities, I know and instinctively trust the fleshy grip and release of rock between my toes, that tender yet ready contact. Mo‘o move through the lands and waters they belong to with skill, their grip and release decisively inscribed on mountains and cliffs, in waterfalls and freshwater ponds. Formidable protectors, mo‘o are also shape-shifters. So what is a poem for a mo‘o poet but another pond to guard and love? What are her blank pages but pōhaku to fortify her waters?

On the one hand, poetry is that fleshy grip. Or, as Lehua Taitano calls her early relationship to African American literature in the rural, white South, poetry can be “a clinging to.” In the thick dark perpetrated by cultural imperialism, we grope for the intimacy of seeing and being seen. Indeed, in our various leaps to clarify our collective potential, decolonial practices of kinship and community are pivotal.

Audrey Brown-Pereira compassionately reminds us to use more than our eyes to see, and with the mighty reach of social media and communication technology today, it is not what we are missing that illuminates us but what we can learn from each other. So in addition to raising consciousness, poetry as “a clinging to” builds critical solidarity and helps us to replace the oppressive shadow of colonialism with the generative, ancestral darkness that roots us to Oceania.

Of course with clinging must come release. Like our predecessors, Pacific poets of the twenty-first century attempt to let go of the bitter cynicism caused by colonialism, so that we may give our voices back to our lands. As this collection of interviews elucidates, interrogating form steers us to interrogate identity. With new experiences come new responses. Dan Taulapapa McMullin describes writing, editing and publishing *Coconut Milk* as a kind of release, one of many shape-shifting steps to be had in the practice of Pacific literatures. Indeed our poetry continues to de-center colonial values and aesthetics. So to question form, to be playful and audacious, is to be brave about who we are, where we come from, and what we are capable of creating. As form proliferates, we witness how our poetry can shape-shift our courage.

Yet a lingering question for Pacific poets often rings: “What can poetry actually do?” In the face of environmental degradation, human-rights abuses, racism, displacement and abject poverty, how can poetry participate meaningfully in our social-justice movements?

First and foremost, we must remember that, in the Pacific, our poets never work alone. We draw knowledge from our farmers, fishermen, historians, warriors, teachers, mothers, elders, scientists, dancers, students, religious practitioners and activists. We answer to our communities. We answer to our lands. In the essay “Our Sea of Islands,” Epeli Hau‘ofa tells us that smallness is a state of mind. This wisdom should not be limited to physical interpretations, but rather should help us re-imagine what our words and voices are capable of (un)doing.

Contemporary poetry in Oceania continues to challenge the blank stare of white pages shot from Euro-American canons. We are shape-shifting white space into breathing space, into living Pacific stories. The inclusion of two Pacific women writers and a fa‘afafine artist in this brilliant collection reminds us that what we protect, what we cultivate should not replicate whitestream practices of exclusion. Our vastness is not premised on a “purity” of cis (heterosexual, chiefly) and university-educated men.

Our vastness is also queer, feminist, mixed-race, diasporic, working-class, grass-roots and female.

Our poetry is a potent in-between, navigating the real and the imagined, what is and what could be, the material conditions of colonialism and the possibilities of our decolonial love—and in this *vā*, we have our Great Brown Epiphanies; we embroider Bible verses on pillow cases; we do *tivaevae*; we drink kava; we fuck daffodils; we start our own presses; we speak our own languages and we name ourselves. This collection of interviews proudly exemplifies the ingenuity of Pacific poetry. Here is a space that is both tenacious and hopeful.

AUTHOR BIOS



Audrey Brown-Pereira was born in 1975 in Rarotonga, and is of Cook Islands Maori and Samoan descent. Her newest poetic collection is *passages in between i(s)lands*. Her poetry also appears in *Mauri Ola*, *Whetu Moana* and *Mana*. Her work draws on visual and aural elements, as can be seen in her collection with new-media artist Veronica Vaevae, *Threads of Tivaevae: Kaleido skope of Kolours* (2002), her New Zealand Fringe Festival performance piece *Teuki: Past with the Present* (2002), art catalogues *Akara ki Mua* (2001) and *Inei Konei* (1998), the experimental film *The Rainbow* (1998) and short film *The Cats Are Crying* (1995).



Craig Santos Perez is a native Chamoru (Chamorro) from the Pacific Island of Guåhan (Guam). He is the co-founder of Ala Press, co-star of the poetry album *Undercurrent*, and author of three collections of poetry: *from unincorporated territory [hacha]*, *from unincorporated territory [saina]* and *from unincorporated territory [guma']*. He is an associate professor in the English Department and affiliate faculty with the Center for Pacific Islands Studies and the Indigenous Politics Program at the University of Hawai'i-Mānoa.



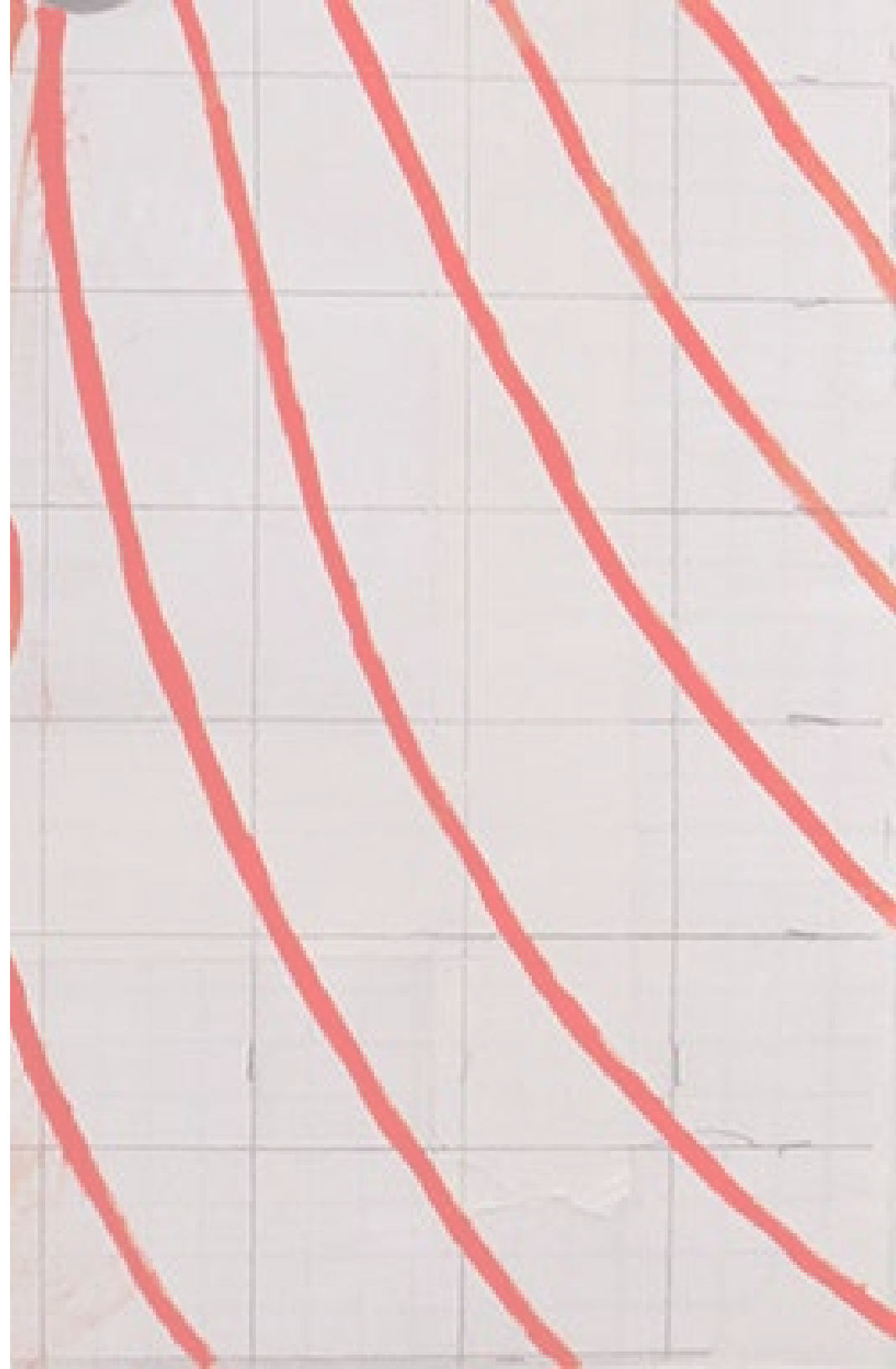
No'u Revilla is a Kanaka Maoli poet and PhD student in English at the University of Hawai'i-Mānoa. She has performed throughout Hawai'i, as well as in Papua New Guinea and Toronto. She recently organized the Aloha 'Āina Zine Workshop in solidarity with the protectors of Mauna Kea.



Lehua M. Taitano, a native Chamoru from Yigo, Guahãn (Guam), is a queer poet, writer and artist living in Sonoma County, California. She is the author of one volume of poetry, *A Bell Made of Stones*, and the H.G. Merriam-Frontier Award-winning chapbook *appalachiapacific* (2010).



Dan Taulapapa McMullin is an artist whose practice includes painting, installation, video, collage, photography, sculpture, poetry, text and performance. His book of poetry, *Coconut Milk*, was named by the American Library Association in its top 10 best GLBT books of the year. He was artist-in-residence at the De Young Museum in San Francisco and the University of the South Pacific's Oceania Centre for the Arts in Suva, and taught painting and poetry for indigenous artists with First Light Alaska and Honolulu Museum of Art School. In 2015 he is taking part in exhibitions at the Pacific Islander Ethnic Museum in Long Beach and at the Oakland Museum. His studio practice is based in Hudson, New York.





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