

### *Bloody Woman*

By Lana Lopesi. Wellington, Bridget Williams Books, 2021.

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Reviewed by Helena Cook

*Bloody Woman* is Lana Lopesi's exploration of identity: of what it means to be Sāmoan, of the diaspora and a woman. Her essays cover an extensive range of issues, from representations of brown joy, to abortion, to the Teine Sā, but the common thread that binds her writing together is bodies; specifically, what it is like for Lopesi to exist in a brown Sāmoan female body in Aotearoa New Zealand. Body and identity are inherently bound here in ways that are inescapable; we can see ourselves through gendered/racial/national/sexual/religious lens and we are often seen by others in the same ways. We can't escape our histories and this impacts how we understand who we are and the worlds we walk in. *Bloody Woman* is an attempt to try and give voice to some of the issues that keep Indigenous/Black/Brown women awake at night. It is a book successfully designed to appeal a general audience, rather than operating as a specifically academic text. Lopesi's essays begin to explore ideas of intersectionality through her own lived experiences and those of the women she knows, and many of the essays, particularly 'Swimming in Circles' and 'An Open Letter to my Future Adult Children' draw on personal experiences and lessons learnt as a way to open dialogue around heavy issues. My own experience of being a Sāmoan woman in Aotearoa is both similar and different to Lopesi's but she notes that these are her own personal thoughts and observations, rather than a representation of all Sāmoan womanhood. This perhaps gives the book the space to weave between personal essays and a journalistic, engaging style of writing and it's an extremely accessible way for introduce readers to theories of indigenous/Brown/Black feminism, power and colonisation.

In the introduction, Lopesi uses blood as a central metaphor for Sāmoan womanhood, through menstrual cycles, the colour of flowers/lips/feathers, the creation of warrior goddess Nafanua born from a blood clot. The essays mostly touch on these concepts tangentially however; instead weaving together pop culture references, questions around identity and discussions of Sāmoan values to draw a picture of a woman walking between multiple worlds and evaluating the overlap. The strongest content in this book draws on this intersectionality: 'Brown and Bougie' reflects on the importance of fashion for Black and Brown diasporic communities while also analysing the role class plays in identity formation and 'There is a Vā between my Thighs' is a comprehensive and challenging discussion of how to define an undefinable concept and how vā is understood and conceptualised in a colonised world.

One of the most fascinating essays in this collection is 'Teine Sā: My Feminist Icons'. The Teine Sā are Sāmoan female spirits (aitu) who "maintain ancient knowledge, to caution us". They are sexual, jealous aitu who entice young men to lust and can possess or curse young women who flaunt their beauty or their long flowing hair. While often used as a means to police female behaviour and inspire values of humility and morality, Lopesi argues that the Teine Sā were themselves judged for their promiscuity and their extravagance, powerful and feared but also demonised in a specifically gendered way that strips their mana. Many of the essays in *Bloody Woman* struggle with this colonial legacy of shame around womanhood; questions of how to exist as a sexual being, with loud and public demonstrations of brown joy, as a cyber activist or an unpaid carer, or even how to speak about these issues within Lopesi's own positionality. She writes "You could argue that this is a project where a bougie Islander who wears shell earrings explains what a Sāmoan woman is - I accept that."

Much of the book explores the ways that colonisation has left an indelible mark on the experiences of brown female bodies, who must now negotiate gender, respectability, culture and power within the structures. Sometimes it feels like Lopesi is having her own revelations as she writes; she notes in 'Becoming a Bloody Woman' that "I have now become aware of gendered power, alongside racial and class power, in a way that I cannot ignore anymore." This particular essay attempts to reconcile the challenges of being a woman of colour and the potentially contentious language of white feminism. She writes that Pacific women face challenges of not only being overlooked in favour of their Pacific male counterparts in the arts and academia, they also face pay inequity and lack of recognition for the (usually unpaid) care work they undertake. This is not new or surprising information for women in general but Lopesi argues that there is a significant lack of language to combine Sāmoan identity and "woman stuff" which leads to struggles in how to sit the two concepts side by side or hand in hand. The politics of respectability for brown women (not too loud, not too crass, non-threatening to Western culture) can bind Sāmoan women to reproducing colonial power structures which disadvantage and, in some cases, actively hurt them.

Lopesi draws on many Pacific writers throughout her work, quoting from Selina Tusitala Marsh, Sean Mallon, Albert Wendt, Melani Anae and Tusiata Avia, to name a few. It's always heartening to see Pacific stories told by Pacific people and I felt Lopesi's urgency both to articulate her own lived experiences and to note the importance of not limiting "the Pacific experience" to one specific idealised perspective. She argues "To get out from the perceived fixation on a particular kind of woman that we have inherited from the colonial imaginary, the fixation on just one kind of experience, is to claim range." This book gives the sense that Lopesi is herself still navigating through these 'spiralling circles' of what it means to be a woman, to be Sāmoan and to be the myriad of other identities we inhabit. Her writing struggles almost breathlessly at times against 'respectability politics' and the deeply embedded way these are bound up with colonial power and gendered perceptions of Sāmoan women. This kind of frustration is understandable for anyone navigating identities where the norms of power and culture are often dictated by the dominant group. As such, *Bloody Woman* is a courageous voice of the Pacific female diaspora and an important contribution to the diverse collection of stories which we tell about ourselves.