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**“Oceania is Us:” An Intimate Portrait of CHamoru Identity
and Transpacific Solidarity in *from unincorporated territory:
[lukao]***

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Guam, or *Guåhan* in the CHamoru language, holds a history of traumatic and unresolved militarization imposed by several countries including the United States. From 1521 to 1898, Spain colonized Guåhan and inflicted near-total genocide (Taimanglo). From 1898 to 1941, the occupier became the United States, which inflicted its own trauma — until 1941, when Japanese forces attacked and occupied the island (Taimanglo). In 1944, the United States attacked the island once more, gaining control over the island and eventually deeming it an “unincorporated territory” — which poet and author Dr. Craig Santos Perez recognizes in the title of his anthology, *from unincorporated territory: [lukao]*. In this anthology, Perez elaborates on the effects of America’s forceful repossession and consequent influence: he writes that on July 21st, 1944, “300 U.S. fighter jets dropped 124 tons of bombs on Guam, and thousands of American soldiers invaded our shores to ‘save’ [us] from the Japanese” (*from unincorporated territory: [lukao]* 43). Though Guåhan is a territory of the United States, the island’s inhabitants are not represented in Congress — nor do their votes count in national elections (Ossola). Perez uses his CHamoru perspective to represent his passion and advocacy on behalf of his homeland; furthermore, he recognizes similar experiences throughout Oceania as a whole, and uses his anthology as a medium for transpacific advocacy. Through an analysis of his 2017 anthology *from unincorporated territory: [lukao]*, this essay examines how Dr. Craig Santos Perez casts light on the complex inheritance of native CHamorus via an intimate portrait of diasporic CHamoru identity. Furthermore, I argue that Perez’s view of Pacific Islands as an interconnected *unit* — in the same vein as Tongan-Fijian scholar Epeli Hau’ofa’s idea of a “sea of islands” — furthers the anthology’s alternate function as an inclusive call for justice on behalf of *all* transpacific peoples affected by American militarization and colonization, bound together both by the “communion” of the ocean and by the shared fallout of nuclear activity in the Pacific (Hau’ofa 152; “Praise Song for Oceania”).

Perez summarizes the gravity of the effects of American militarization on Guåhan by dividing his anthology *from unincorporated territory [lukao]* into disaggregated sections that read when combined, “Because America / can’t demilitarize / its imagination / people around the world / are dying” (*[lukao]*). These words have a cautionary effect and hint at the burdens suffered across the

world due to American militarization. One direct effect of militarization is the seizure of land from indigenous peoples — and its immense impact is augmented by the *value* of land for these peoples. In his fictional novel *Melal*, which reveals the effects of American militarization on the Marshall Islands, Robert Barclay quotes the following excerpt from a petition sent by Marshallese leaders to the United Nations:

[l]and means ... more than just a place where you can plant your food crops and build your houses, or a place where you can bury your dead. It is the very life of the people. Take away their land and their spirits go also. (73)

In *Melal*, a native Marshallese character named Jebro inherits ancestral land that “gave his life profound meaning and position,” and about which he had been taught since “before he could remember” (Barclay 80, 79). When he learns that America’s atomic tests have demolished his “rightful land, his inheritance,” he feels that the bomb had “destroyed part of his soul” (Barclay 79). Likewise, Guåhan governor Ricardo J. Bordallo argues on behalf of his nation’s land:

Guam is not just a piece of real estate to be exploited for its money-making potential. Above all else, Guam is the homeland of the Chamorro people. That is a fundamental, undeniable truth. We are very profoundly “taotao tano” — people of the land. This land, tiny as it is, belongs to us just as surely, just as inseparably, as we belong to it. No tragedy of history or declaration of conquest, no legalistic double-talk can change that fact. Guam is our legacy. Is it for sale? How can one sell a national birthright? (Phillips)

Historian Lawrence Cunningham argues that the American-perpetuated idea of property ownership violates the central value of CHamoru culture: *Inafa’maolek*, or interdependence (Phillips). This holds what he calls a “powerful concern for mutuality” that transcends the notion of individualism and, by extension, private property rights (Phillips).

Following World War I, much of Guåhan land was taken by the American government for a measly cost — or outright stolen — for militaristic purposes (Ossola). The United States Department of Defense currently possesses 30 percent (a percentage which is only increasing with time) of Guåhan’s 212 square miles, upon which it has built Naval Base Guam and Andersen Air Force Base — and military spending is currently the island’s biggest industry (Ossola). Guåhan Legislature, or *Guåhan Liheslaturan*, publishes their reaction to their nation’s loss:

world war, and attendant national security issues of the United States, motivated the taking of vast tracts of Guamanian lands by the United States under powers of eminent domain for the purposes of U.S. military base development ... [we] find and declare the United States’ acquisition of Guamanian land was unconscionable, unfair, unjust and inequitable. (Guam Legislature 8)

Haldre Rogers, a professor of ecology and biology at Iowa State University, claims that as a result of land seizure there has been a long sequence of military distrust built over the past 80 years — and that it will take much longer to repair military-based sentiment in Guåhan (Ossola).

A secondary effect of land seizure may be the possible dissipation of the idea of “home” in affected indigenous lands. Just as the United States military has violated and continues to encroach upon more and more of Guåhan land, native CHamorus and other indigenous Pacific Islanders are leaving their island behind to settle in the United States — due to reasons such as record local unemployment, the ability to work “indefinitely” in the United States without a visa, prominence of military enlistment, and scholarships toward schools in the contiguous states (Zak 1). In fact, Pacific Islander population in the United States grew 40 percent through diaspora between 2000 and 2010, while at present, the CHamoru population on Guåhan itself has been deemed a minority at a mere 37 percent (“How Pacific Islander Students Are Slipping Through the Cracks,” Landy, 1). Furthermore, inter-Pacific migration is also prominent, and “movements within island groups and the greater Pacific Ocean ... have enabled these islands to create complex identities that have expanded beyond their natural boundaries” (Papoutsaki and Strickland).

Perez dubs himself a “diasporic Chamorro” because he was born in Guåhan but later chose to live in Hawai’i (“Off-Island Chamorros”). Likewise, a prominent theme expressed in *[lukao]* is the conflict in the concept of home versus geographic proximity in CHamoru tradition and modern culture. Kirsten McGavin, a postdoctoral research fellow of anthropology at the University of Queensland, states the following on the subject:

[f]or Pacific Islanders ... the concept of a ‘homeland’ is often anchored in notions of *peles* ... [in which] ‘A central quality of Micronesian identity is the strong cultural attachment to home and land, as it is among many Pacific Islanders ... *Peles* is a multivocal term indicating a person’s place ... of Indigenous origin. *Peles* refers not just to the physical landscape, but also to the seascape and starscape and to the less-tangible spheres such as the spiritscape. [...] some informants describe this connection as being ‘carried in their blood’, particularly because links to *peles* are defined through matrilineal or patrilineal lines of descent. (McGavin)

Perez shows his connection to his *peles* throughout *from unincorporated territory: [lukao]*, but especially in his separate poem, “Off-Island Chamorros,” in which he reminds other CHamorus that, “migration flows through our blood. Remember: we carry our culture in the canoes of our bodies” (“Off-Island Chamorros”). Perez also demonstrates his connection with his kin, especially his matrilineal side: in *[lukao]*, he interviews his mother, grandmother, aunt, and wife. His resulting project is a multifaceted portrait of indigenous people, experiences, and perspectives, in which Perez primarily seeks to learn more about his cultural traditions and intimate familial stories and allows readers to “eavesdrop” on his “conversations” (Perez, Skype Interview 2019). In this respect, Perez clearly attempts to connect with and maintain his cultural traditions, as reflected in *[lukao]*. For instance, Perez explains that in CHamoru birthing practices, “the apuya’ (umbilical cord) and pares (placenta) were buried beneath or near the house because Chamorros believe that doing so would keep

children close to home throughout their lives” (*[lukao]* 21). Perez’s mother admits that while she was pregnant in California, it was her wish for her son to be born on Guåhan (*[lukao]* 36). Geographic proximity, then, seems to be a cultural and familial value — but Perez states that, “[w]e are the most ‘geographically dispersed’ Pacific Islander population within the United States, and off-island Chamorros now outnumber our on-island kin, with generations having been born away from our ancestral homelands, including my daughter” (“Off-Island Chamorros”). Forty-four thousand CHamorus currently live in California alone (*[lukao]* 22). Perez’s self-identified “malologue,” “from the legends of *juan malo*,” reveals the widespread dispersal of CHamoru peoples:

[t]his year, Chamorros will be celebrating Liberation Day in Bremerton, WA, Dayton, OH, Fort Bragg, NC, Fort Jackson, SC, Hopewell, VA, Jacksonville, FL, Killeen & Copperas Cove, TX, Port Hueneme Naval Base Ventura County, CA, San Antonio, TX, San Diego, CA, Yuba City, CA, Washington D.C., and South Korea. (*[lukao]* 44)

In fact, Kirsten McGavin states that “[t]he very nature of a diaspora relies on the notion that the people ‘contained’ within it identify ... with a distant homeland” (McGavin). Perez concludes “Off-Island Chamorros” with the pertinent verse, “home is not simply a house, village, or island; home is an archipelago of belonging” (“Off-Island Chamorros” 1). These words are representative of *from unincorporated territory: [lukao]* — in which Perez explores the concept of home through familial and migratory cultural ties.

Diaspora may dually contribute to and result from the notion of transpacific unity. Perez was born in Guåhan but immigrated to Hawai‘i, where he has nurtured respect for Native Hawaiian customs and language amid his marriage to a Native Hawaiian (*[lukao]*). Throughout *[lukao]*, Perez reinforces the idea of transpacific unity and, as an extension, the collective call for justice on behalf of indigenous transpacific peoples. In “*ginen: understory*,” he references Nagasaki, Japan and the Bikini Atoll of the Marshall Islands, calling to attention “... what cancers remain / buried in pacific bodies like unexploded / ordnances” (*[lukao]* 61). Perez uses “Pacific bodies” as a collective term, recognizing the shared plight of indigenous peoples across the Pacific resulting from immense radiation — and the particular trauma for Marshallese and Japanese peoples, who suffered from the atomic blasts outright. Perez also employs educational “poemaps” dispersed throughout the anthology. For instance, “Poemap based on ‘Telegeography cable network map, 2009’” emphasizes the significance of Oceania’s islands in communication between Asia, America, and Australia — especially the critical roles of Guåhan and Hawai‘i (*[lukao]* 9). “Poemap based on the ‘Key US Bases in Pacific Pivot Buildup’ map” recognizes United States military presence on several islands, including on Hawai‘i, American Samoa, the Marshall Islands, and the Mariana Islands (*[lukao]* 25). Through explicit references such as these, Perez broadens his subject from Guåhan to include sister islands throughout the Pacific. He recognizes that all of Oceania has been

“raped,” or violated, by imperialism — but that “the rape of oceania / began with guam” (*[lukao]* 65).

Perez’s poem, “i tinituhon,” appears twice in the novel, and both times it raises the topic of transpacific unity by subtracting the concept of space between islands in Oceania, suggesting to regard them as a whole unit instead. He writes two versions of the same verses, “wheredo islands / begin and end[...],” and, “where do islands / end and begin” (*[lukao]* 15, 31). Through these varied forms, Perez raises the notion that islands are not in fact separate entities, but rather that they are *united* by the very thing that outsiders would argue divides them: the ocean. Tongan-Fijian writer Epeli Hau’ofa, one of Perez’s inspirations, emphasizes the idea of a “sea of islands” instead of “islands in a far sea” with the argument that “the idea of smallness is relative” and a “state of mind” (Hau’ofa 152). He argues against the idea of “islands in a far sea,” stating that, “... [f]ocusing in this way stresses the smallness and remoteness of the islands. The second is a more holistic perspective in which things are seen in the totality of their relationships” (Hau’ofa 152). Hau’ofa expounds, “[p]eoples of Oceania ... did not conceive of their world in such microscopic proportions. Their universe comprised not only land surfaces, but the surrounding ocean ... Their world was anything but tiny” (Hau’ofa 153).

Not solely does the ocean *contribute* to Pacific Islanders’ worldview, but for many communities it “constitute[s] ... a fundamental and spiritual basis of existence. The Ocean is their identity, way of living, values, knowledge and practices that have sustained them for millennia” (Huffer 1). In Perez’s “Praise Song for Oceania,” he addresses the ocean directly in a second-person point of view, demonstrating his reverence:

your capacity
for communion /
praise our common heritage /
praise our pathway
& promise to each other / praise
our endless saga / praise our most powerful
metaphor / praise this vision
of belonging / praise your horizon
of care / praise our blue planet,
one world ocean / praise our trans-oceanic
past, present & future flowing
through our blood. (“Praise Song for Oceania”)

Perez claims the ocean is what “communes” his “trans-oceanic” fellows, recognizing that the “one world ocean” is singular yet vast, encompassing and uniting all the world’s inhabitants (“Praise Song for Oceania”). He uses the pronoun “our” against a backdrop of “common heritage,” raising the question that perhaps the familiar “[we]” and “[us]” throughout *from unincorporated territory*: *[lukao]* may refer to more than his immediate family or CHamoru

relatives. This poem suggests that Perez’s anthology was written perhaps in solidarity with *all* transpacific peoples.

Perez demonstrates both transpacific unity and the endeavor for social justice through the use of prose and hashtags throughout his anthology. The hashtag “#prayfor_____,” which he uses repeatedly, could be interpreted as a placeholder for names of various Pacific Islands — due not only to natural disasters, but intentional injustices (*[lukao]* 24; 40; 56; 72). Perez seems to intentionally pair each of these pages containing the “#prayfor_____” hashtag parallel to a poem page that calls attention to transpacific militarization, toxic waste on Guåhan, and the effect of the American military’s shooting range on endangered Guåhan wildlife (*[lukao]* 24; 40; 56; 72). The use of hashtags as a medium for activism appears in other poems. For instance, Perez writes “#justiceforkollinelderts” in one poem, demonstrating his solidarity with an unarmed Native Hawaiian who died after he was shot by a police officer under the influence of alcohol (“Judge Rules against 3rd Trial for US Agent in Fatal Shooting”). Another hashtag used is “#placentalpolitics,” in which Perez rebelliously attempts to maintain his cultural practice of burying his child’s placenta near the home — against U.S. Naval orders that it “[...] must be burned because they [are] hazardous waste” (*[lukao]* 69).

Other hashtags Perez employs are “#yesallwomen,” “#bringbackourgirls,” and “#mmiw” — which refer to the recognition of misogyny and violence against women, the kidnapping of female Chibok students, and the advocacy toward awareness of “missing and murdered indigenous women” (*[lukao]* 65) respectively. In “(first teeth),” Perez uses “#freepalestine,” “#blacklivesmatter,” and mentions the “thousands of youth atop la bestia #unaccompanied” (*[lukao]* 33). In these poems, Perez takes an inclusive, global stand toward social justice, fighting on behalf of *all* lands which the ocean connects. He employs another hashtag at the close of the poem following a line of wishes for his infant daughter — which perhaps suggests his awareness that as a future indigenous woman, she is at risk for some injustice against which he is both dismayed by and prepared to fight (*[lukao]* 33). Perez’s concern for his daughter’s safety due in part to her indigenous identity is not out of the question, since indigenous peoples across the world have faced centuries of injustices.

Indigenous people in Oceania have much to remember and heal from due to America’s militarization in the twentieth century. Radiation fallout from nuclear-weapons testing has caused *intergenerational* harm especially in the Marshall Islands, where the lasting effects of radiation beyond cancer extend to further generations — found in miscarriages, deformed “jellyfish babies,” and the general stint on population growth (Zak). Surrounding territories, including Guåhan, also absorbed radioactive debris from fallout during nuclear testing (“Appendix C: Radioactivity in Guam After Nuclear-Weapons Testing in the Pacific”). Perez reflects that “\\ rain clouds baptize guam / in strontium-90 fallout, / circa 1954” and wonders what “downwind toxins / will [his daughter]

inhale when her lungs / first expand” (*[lukao]* 61). Furthermore, the trauma experienced on Liberation Day is inaccurately represented in what Perez dubs “celebration colonialism”: *the legends of juan malo (a malologue)* demonstrates Perez’s incredulity that Guåhan *celebrates* a holiday on the date when the United States dropped 124 tons of bombs on Guåhan to liberate them from the Japanese (*[lukao]* 44). He writes:

[d]espite the amount of Budweiser consumed on Liberation Day, [we] sober up after calculating the high number of sacrificial Chamorros enlisting in the U.S. military, and yet our debt to the “savior” is still ballooning out of control. Maybe next year, the theme of the parade will be: “Kao magâhet na manlibre hit? Is it true that we are liberated?” (*[lukao]* 44)

In addition to health risks, American militarization has also generated widespread linguistic effects throughout Oceania — as writer and anthropologist Peter Rudiak-Gould states, “[a]nywhere there’s a coral atoll and a unique cultural group on that atoll, there’s that potential for mass migration and extinction of languages” (Walsh). CHamorus were banned from speaking their native language under the U.S. Naval Administration in 1917 — who collected and burned CHamoru books and introduced the game of baseball as an activity for youth under the condition that they spoke English (Taitano; Skype Interview). Schoolchildren were harshly punished if they spoke CHamoru in schools (Perez, Skype Interview 2019). A century later, the CHamoru language is severely endangered: according to the U.S. census from 1990 to 2010, “the number of Chamorro speakers declined from 34,598 to 25,827 ... Between 2010 and 2016, thousands more have been lost, bringing the estimate to 10,000” (Eugenio). Today, CHamoru, Marshallese and over one hundred other languages in the Pacific territories are endangered (Walsh).

Ultimately, throughout *from unincorporated territory: [lukao]*, Craig Santos Perez establishes a historical context of nineteenth century Guåhan, promoting transpacific advocacy and unity as he educates readers on the effects of colonization and militarization on CHamorus and indigenous peoples throughout Oceania, on their land, and on their languages. Despite the physical and emotional intergenerational effects that stem from American militarization, Perez has confidence in the survival of CHamoru culture and language — and in those of other countries throughout Oceania (Perez, Skype Interview, 2019). Perez states that he is certain the CHamoru language will survive — “it takes a lot to kill a language” — as even if native speakers were to cease to exist, their language can be learned and relearned, and passed onto future generations (Skype). Perez possesses the view that both Guåhan and Oceania itself are constant and unfailing — a view that his inspiration Epeli Hau’ofa would likely share (Skype). As Hau’ofa asserts, “Oceania is vast, Oceania is expanding, Oceania is hospitable and generous, Oceania is humanity rising from the depths of brine and regions of fire deeper still, Oceania is us” (Hau’ofa 160). The resilience of Oceania’s languages — its *cultures* — should not be underestimated.

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