

# *Navigating CHamoru Poetry: Indigeneity, Aesthetics, and Decolonization*

Reviewed by PAULETTE M. COULTER

*Navigating CHamoru Poetry: Indigeneity, Aesthetics, and Decolonization*, by Craig Santos Perez. University of Arizona Press, 2021. ISBN: 9780816535507, 272 pages (paperback).

In *Navigating CHamoru Poetry: Indigeneity, Aesthetics, and Decolonization*, Craig Santos Perez offers the reader “the first full length study of [selected] contemporary CHamoru literature” (xi). A preface, acknowledgments, an introduction, four numbered chapters, and a conclusion form the body of *Navigating CHamoru Poetry*. A table of contents lists the chapters and illustrations, which include 20 figures and four maps. Notes (many and substantial), a selected bibliography, and an index follow the conclusion.

In the Preface, “From Unincorporated Territory,” Perez describes key events of his life, particularly his move from Guåhan (Guam) to the United States (U.S.) mainland, his personal feelings about this move, and his education and life in the U.S. This book reworks material from his dissertation for completion of his doctoral degree at the University of California, Berkeley. He states that he has revised it over many years and has added research. The book is both scholarly (as it should be) and *readable*, something that cannot always be said of revised dissertations.

The four maps that precede the Introduction allow the reader to identify the setting of Guåhan in Oceania, Micronesia, the Mariana Islands, and finally as the island itself with its villages. The Introduction bears the title, “On Being ~~Chamorro Guamanian~~ CHamoru: Indigeneity, Aesthetics, and Decolonization” (v, 7; page numbers refer to the Kindle version and may differ from the printed text.). This title, with its cross-outs, reflects the concerns of contemporary CHamorus with their identity, their cultural values, and their history as a colony of Spain, the U.S., Japan, and the U.S. again after World War II. The name Guåhan was chosen via executive order in 2010 (11), while the spelling CHamoru was established by law in 2018 (10).

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Guåhan's history of colonization from 1668 to the present has been one of *-zations* by other nations: Hispanicization, Americanization, Japanization, and, again, Americanization. In each case, militarization played a major part. This has led to justifiable CHamoru concern over indigeneity and authenticity. But the fact is that, despite theories of the "fatal impact" of *-zations* on them, CHamoru culture has changed over time, and CHamorus still exist, both on island and in the diaspora. Perez adopts an alternative to "fatal impacts"; in so doing, he presents a theoretical discussion, sometimes a bit heavy, that explains how CHamorus have engaged in Chamorroization (15). They have selected the changes they were and are willing to make from outside influences and reorganize, or articulate, them into their own ideologies and practices. To expect that CHamoru culture did not or would not change from 1521 (Magellan's arrival) to 1668 (Diego San Vitores's arrival), and to the arrival of the nation-colonizers might be to expect a more nearly fatal outcome for CHamoru culture.

Perez believes that CHamoru literature is "one site through which CHamoru identity is expressed, represented, innovated, and articulated" (18). This includes both oral literature (oral tradition in song and story) and written literature--something none of the colonizing nations ever focused on, but which is more recently becoming a point of focus. Since the 1960s, more and more written works by and about CHamorus and CHamoru culture have appeared. Perez lists and discusses a number of these works (19-24). Although he writes that "the list is neither comprehensive nor exhaustive" (24), he lists many in an easily accessible manner.

Perez continues the Introduction with a discussion of theoretical writing and work in the arts being done by CHamoru scholars and scholars of CHamoru. Thereafter he addresses the concept of "wayfaring," or finding one's way in navigation, and develops the concept of "wayreading" (31ff.), a means to navigate a way to CHamoru indigeneity, aesthetics, and decolonization through reading CHamoru poetry. He wayreads the work of others in following chapters.

Chapter 1 addresses "Taotao Tano': Sacred land, Banyan Tree Aesthetics, and CHamoru Ecopoetics." Here Perez analyzes the unpublished master's theses at the Center for Pacific Islands Studies,

University of Hawai'i, Manoa. C T Perez wrote "Signs of Being: A Chamorro Spiritual Journey," and Kisha Borja-Kicho'cho', and Anghet Hoppe-Cruz jointly wrote "I Kareran I Palåbran Måni--The Journey of Our Words. These three women emphasize values that relate kinship, land, and gender equality; reciprocity between humans and nature; and "the most important CHamoru cultural value, inafa'maolek" (39), the concept of interdependence of nature, women and men, and family. In prose and poetry they demonstrate that "colonial agriculture, militarism, urbanism have displaced spiritual beliefs about the land" thereby contaminating it. Craig Santos Perez relates their works to an eco-theology visible in the CHamoru creation story of Puntan and Fu'una, who made the world from their own bodies. Treating the Earth and the beings in it with respect, then, shows respect for the gods who created it and remain in it. Because of its association with the "taotaomo'na (literally translated as 'the people of before'), [who] continue to dwell on and in the land" (39), the banyan tree deserves special attention.

In Chapter 2 Perez examines two works by Peter Onedera (*Visions of a Chamoru* [1995]) and *Taimanu na Ini* [2018]) in his analysis of narrative and architecture, focusing on the "CHamoru House of Story," as the chapter title mentions. Perez focuses on the *guma' latte*, or latte stone architecture of around 900 A.D. and thereafter. He sees latte houses as related to CHamoru origins and a connection between the taotaomo'na and the currently living, the taotao tåno.

Onedera's *Visions of a Chamoru* consists of 24 poems "in English, CHamoru, and pidgin," many in stanzaic form with rhyme on themes of "cultural identity, childhood, language, nostalgia, colonialism acculturation, militarism, the environment, and decolonization" (79), still current themes. In particular, "I Walked Down Every Street" of his childhood village emphasizes nostalgia for his childhood home. Latte stones formed the foundation of ancient CHamoru houses. Perez sees the latte's structure ("a haligi [vertical pillar] and a tasa [bowl-shaped capstone]"; 75) in the organization of *Visions of a Chamoru* in the alternation of poems in English with those in CHamoru (95). The book cover presents a human profile in the form of the latte (82). Onedera refers specifically to the latte in the poem "O Åcho Latte/O Rock of Strength" in *Taimanu na Ini*, presented in CHamoru and translated

publicly into English for the first time (92-93). Again, the alternating CHamoru and English lines may suggest the latte. For Onedera, the poem represents continuity with the past: “You may be gone from everything there is/But you will forever be near to me through your heart” (92). The persistence of the latte symbol in architectural elements, however, suggests it is present Onedera’s heart as well and in the hearts of many others (see also page 98). In addition, Borja-Kicho’cho’s poem, “Nåna,” which Perez includes, has the shape of the latte stone, which may also be, I suggest, the shapes of an adult and a child reaching toward each other (97).

Chapter 3 focuses on Lehua Taitano’s map poems in *Inside Me an Island*. This title comes from a poem in her earlier book, *A Bell Made of Stone*: “inside me an island / shaped hole” (*A Bell* 13). Thus, none of the maps has an outline, but each has verbal content. Perez examines in detail the six poems titled *maps*, suggesting that “Taitano’s use of innovative visual typographies and formal poetic techniques evokes outrigger design and ‘moving islands’ navigational techniques, or what [he] will frame as a ‘flying proa poetics’” (101) related to themes of migration and diaspora.

Like Craig Santos Perez, Taitano left Guam when she was young and has lived primarily in the U.S. since. She learned early on that many maps and globes do not represent the “small islands” (Micronesia) at all, but she did learn of

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(*Inside maps1*; qtd in Perez 120; original is also right-aligned to form a column while the left has one letter not aligned.)

Being unable to do that left her feeling “lost/atsea” (ibid.), a feeling exacerbated by a teacher who pulls her away from a map when she cannot find her island on it (Taitano “maps2”; qtd in Perez 122) Adding to that feeling of “lost,” Taitano, in her own page numbering, places “maps5” thirty pages before “maps4” (Perez 123). “maps4” shows the layout of locations in Northern Guåhan (ibid.), while “maps5” names locations in the southern part of the island, completing “a textual replica of the shape of Guåhan” (ibid.). “maps6” consists of three lines of text, giving the distance of 12,879.5 miles from somewhere in the U.S., and five other lines scattered on the page and struck through, including “~~to Yigo, Guam~~” --but even less readably because done on a manual typewriter (qtd in Perez 126).

For Perez, Taitano’s individualistic layouts suggest that “[w]ayreading the different poetic forms from page to page makes the words appear to be moving (or flying) islands of sound” or moving islands relative to positions of stars as a means of traditional navigation (126, 127). That may be one interpretation; others may be possible.

In Chapter 4 Perez places what he sees as the intertextuality between Anne Perez Hattori’s “Thieves” and Michael Lujan Bevacqua’s “My Island is one Big American Footnote” and among spoken-word poets as modern developments and continuations of the back-and-forth relationships seen in the *kåntan chamorrita*, a traditional “extemporaneous, communal oral poetry that was displaced and suppressed by colonial forces” (131). The *kåntan chamorrita* is a traditional song form of eight-syllable, four-line stanzas with rhymes in lines two and four (132). One stanza is presented as a challenge or call, and another responds, repeating the last two lines of the first and adding another two, repeatedly, until singers can no longer improvise (ibid.) Perez argues that Hattori’s “Thieves” is a call, as it asks who are the real thieves in the history of the island, and that Bevacqua’s “Footnote” is the response in the *kåntan chamorrita*. Here Perez sees the works’ intertextuality as the “oral call-and-response techniques in written form” (152).

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Perez also views a demonstration of this call and response in spoken-word and slam poetry, giving the example of a YouTube recording, “Self-Guamination,” of Ryan Leon Guerreo and Walla Wai, in which the speakers alternate some lines and speak others together. This recording addresses the “silencing of effect of colonialism” (142) as well as emphasizing “the strength and survival of the CHamoru people” (ibid.). This collaboration between a Chamoru poet and another who is Pohnpeian-Hawaiian (143) emphasizes the singing together of the present. Although spoken-word poetry is significantly older than the present (e.g., the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and possibly *Beowulf*) as well as other forms of oral literature, it may be a revival or re-appearance on Guåhan of the kântan chamorrta.

In his conclusion Perez views “CHamoru Literature as Decolonial Activism,” as his subtitle states. In this chapter, Perez addresses the issue of authenticity, an issue also discussed in classes at the University of Guam. Perez writes, for instance, that

literary scholars have argued the contemporary CHamoru literature is degraded and inauthentic because it is often composed in a written form as opposed to an oral form, predominantly in English as opposed to CHamoru, and in a foreign genre as opposed to an Indigenous genre (157).

Isn't this criticism beyond silly? Who is asking current Greek writers to write like Homer? Or current English writers to write like the author(s) of *Beowulf*? Like Chaucer, or Shakespeare, or the Victorians? Writers write for their audiences, even when they choose to write in a language not their own, as Rizal did when he wrote in Spanish because the Spanish needed to hear a message in a language they understood. Many CHamoru writers write in English because their readers read in English, thanks to the oppressive English-only policies of the military governors of Guåhan.

That CHamorus write and speak in English does not change their CHamoru-ness as much as it changes the English language, because these writers frame ideas in CHamoru ways, express CHamoru cultural values, and may help other English speakers see things in a different light, shaped by poets' vision and insight.

So, besides people interested CHamoru poets and poetry, who should or may want to buy this book? Obvious choices may be teachers of

students who want to find others like themselves in print. This book provides many options on that topic. The Introduction to Craig Santos Perez's *Navigating CHamoru Poetry*, alone, is worth the price of the book. There he traces the publication of CHamoru poetry, including titles and poets, from 1965 to the present, and major works in CHamoru literary studies. Many of the latter are less accessible than the former, as they are unpublished theses. Footnotes, however, provide the necessary citations.

### **References**

Taitano, Lehua M. *A Bell Made of Stones*. TinFish P, 2013.  
----- . *Inside Me an Island: Poems*, WordTech Editions, 2018.