

The Song Maps of Craig Santos Perez

Perez, Craig Santos. *from unincorporated territory [hacha]*. Kaneohe: Tinfo Press, 2008.

<http://tinforess.com/?projects=from-unincorporated-territory>

Perez, Craig Santos. *from unincorporated territory [saina]*. Richmond, CA: Omnidawn, 2010. 136 pp.

<http://www.omnidawn.com/products-page/current/from-unincorporated-territory-saina-craig-santos-perez/>

Perez, Craig Santos. *from unincorporated territory [guma']*. Richmond, CA: Omnidawn, 2014. 96 pp.

<http://www.omnidawn.com/products-page/current/from-unincorporated-territory-gumacraig-santos-perez/>

In Micronesia there is a tradition that some islanders have kept, but that Chamorros, the natives of the Mariana Islands, lost due to colonization long ago: the creation of song maps. After journeys were completed, a song would be created that would weave geographic, biological, and sensory elements together in order to form a map. These songs would take on features such as the stars, the color of the water, the features of shorelines, changes in clouds, the songs of birds. So long as these songs were remembered and passed on, a return journey was always possible. You could find your way back there, even generations later.

The work of Chamorro poet Craig Santos Perez in his series *from unincorporated territory: [hacha]*, *[saina]*, and *[guma']* represents a similar technique. Through his poetry, he weaves together different languages, citations, and spatial configurations in order to challenge old maps and to retrace the steps of Chamorros through their ancient past and challenge the ways in which key points on that journey have come to be represented, remembered, or forgotten. In challenging colonialist, Eurocentric maps, he is also in essence creating new song maps meant to lead Chamorros in new directions in terms of their consciousness and their identity. His work represents a poetic and a political decolonization, whereby the sites that once constricted and constrained us can now help us imagine our liberation.

The *from unincorporated territory* books share an emphasis on Chamorro history and language, chronicling both the centuries of foreign colonization and the myriad forms of native resistance. Interspersed in his poems are lines from conversations with his elders, found textual objects, and collaged documents of many kinds: footnotes, theoretical essays on poetry and postcolonialism, government edicts, religious texts and others. A common focus in his poetry is the commodifying aspects of Guam's tourist economy and the dangerous realities of Guam being a strategically important base for the United States.

These themes also link the Chamorro people to many other island nations in the Pacific suffering under continuing U.S. imperialism, including Perez's current home of Hawai'i, where he is the

director of the creative writing program at the University of Hawai'i in Manoa. Perez writes, in *[saina]*, his second book, “no page is ever terra nullius—each page infused with myth legends talk story—” (65). He is arguing for a poetics informed by postcolonial theory in which the Chamorro archipelago, and other Pacific islands, are viewed not as virgin territory to be discovered and plundered by foreigners, but as distinct, sovereign states with their own civilization and culture long in place.

His words remind us of where we have been and of things we may have forgotten or learned not to remember, and, in doing so, he pushes us into directions we have not considered for centuries. Even a foreign reader not familiar with Chamorro culture, language, or politics will experience life under the weight of imperialism when reading or studying Perez's work—the experience of colonialism, and of decolonizing activism.

A passage from his first work, *[hacha]*, provides a key insight into the theoretical underpinnings of all three books. He writes:

On some maps, Guam doesn't exist; I point to an empty space in the Pacific and say, “I'm from here.” On some maps, Guam is a small unnamed island; I say, “I'm from this unnamed place.” On some maps, Guam is named “Guam U.S.A.” I say, “I'm from a territory of the United States.” On some maps, Guam is named, simply, “Guam”; I say, “I am from Guam.”

Guam is a place that is small compared to most nations in the world but large compared to most islands in the Pacific. Although it has been on the maps of Europeans longer than any others in the Pacific, its existence has always been in flux, in more ways than one. In *[hacha]*, Perez produces a map formed of the list of names that Guam has had or been given by Europeans and other invaders on their maps over the centuries. They range from the Guåhan to Isla de los Ladrones, San Juan, Bahan, and “first province of the great ocean.” In addition to those he lists, there are forty other variations of Guam's name that appear on European maps.

This lability of meaning is not simply a list of mistakes, but part of Guam's colonial past and present. The undecipherability of meaning for the island, the in-between nature of it, is not a misperception, but it is the truth of its formal existence. As a longtime colony, Guam's meaning is flexible and moves constantly between the invisible and the hypervisible. Guam is, after all, the first in the Pacific to be colonized and one of the last now yet to be “free.” It is both a tourist paradise for Asian travelers and a military fortress. For the United States, it is a location that is foreign in a domestic sense. It is both a tiny, insignificant dot on the map and one which global security analyst John Pike argues the US can use to rule the world.

Guam is a place that represents itself as where America's day begins, but you will not find it on the flag or even included on most maps of the US. A place which boasts the highest per capita enlistment in the US military forces, but whose residents don't even get (the pretense) to vote for their commander in chief. Through his three books, Perez draws out the contradictions in Guam's existence. Challenging on the one hand its invisibility, but also the hypervisibility that is derived from US military strategic interests whereby it becomes the USS *Guam*, Fortress Guam, an Unsinkable Aircraft Carrier.

Perez draws on many different voices from Guåhan. He brings in conversations with his elders in his family, government documents, history books, song lyrics, quotes, and poems. His use of “Guam Mentions” is particularly apt: instances, oftentimes ephemeral, momentary, or even slips

of the tongue, where Guam is somehow, in some foreign context, invoked or mentioned. For most academics, these mentions would be meaningless, but, as I have argued, for a place where its formal existence is an obscene liability, those moments carry the trace of Guam's colonization. They expose aspects of Guam's reality as a historical and contemporary colony.

The phrase that Perez constantly untangles and reweaves in his work—"put Guam on the map"—is oftentimes used on Guåhan itself, firstly for the arrival of Magellan during his attempt to circumnavigate the globe in 1521. As Guåhan was the first island in the Pacific to be found by Europeans, it represents the tip of the so-called spear of modernity in the region. That idea of being put on the map is analogous to realizing the promises of modernity. Chamorros entangled in a colonial framework feel compelled to reenact that scene of "being seen" again. As a result, Chamorros can sometimes retrace their lives through the Guam Mentions that they have collected. They can recall the names of Bob Hope, Gloria Estefan, Johnny Carson, Ben Stiller, Hank Johnson, Howard Stern, Mariah Carey, and others who have mocked Guam or mentioned it in movies. There is a colonizing dependency here that Perez seeks to dismantle. Missionaries and explorers supposedly "discovered" us. They "gave" us modern meaning: without them we would be too obviously part of the obscene underbelly of modernity, and so we must continue to crave the gaze of the colonizer in order to continue to exist and move forward into the future.

Across his three books, Perez reminds us of what these perverted maps of meaning look like. In *[hacha]*, he reproduces maps that show Guam as crossroads in the Pacific, linking together the West and the East. Maps that show battlefields during World War II. Maps that show the fact that 29% of Guam's 212 square miles are US military facilities off-limits to the island's ancestral people. In both *[saina]* and *[guma']*, he continues to create maps, albeit not through literal reproductions but instead helping to illustrate Guam's place in the maps of US strategic interests in the Pacific and maps on colonial/imperial violence from Spanish, American and Japanese sources.

But Perez's intent, as already mentioned, is to go beyond these maps to create new ones. His use of Guam Mentions subverts the colonial "common sense" and instead accurately connects the gaze of the colonizer not to possibility but to impossibility, to trauma, to damage, to loss. In *[guma']*, he quotes Ezra Pound, whose Guam Mention is both bewildering and insulting. During World War II, when the Japanese were massacring and enslaving the Chamorro people, Pound proposed giving Japan the island of Guåhan as a spoil of war in exchange for films of *Noh* theater. The colonial structure of Guam's relationship to the U.S. is clear in this mention, as the island and its people matter little, but exist to be used and traded off by poets seeking Japanese culture or imperial powers seeking strategic nodes on military maps.

Perez seeks to turn the reader away from those mythical maps of modernity, whereby inclusion and assimilation lead to viability and universality. He seeks to push them in new directions not beset by those limiting politics of recognition. While his colonial citations challenge, he includes a number of native Chamorro citations as well, which change from conversations with his grandparents to discussions of Chamorro culture during different epochs. The Chamorro language often provides the basis for these alternative paths, like echoing sonar, leading us through layers of language and time. Even if the poems are primarily in English, many of them are written atop foundational Chamorro terms, such as *hånom* (water), *unai* (sand), *tåno'* (land), *tåsi* (ocean). These archetypal terms are meant to reclaim things, most importantly the land and

the sea, which have long been claimed to belong to the imperialist fist of the U.S. but for thousands of years have truly belonged to the Chamorro people.

Guam's visibility is heavily dependent upon its militarization, the history of it being used for military purposes by the United States. For Chamorros the land is *tāno'*, *tano'-hu* (my land), *lina'la'* (life), but for the US, it is territory, a base, a colony to be utilized. But as the island, its land, its people are weighted beneath layers of colonial ideology, this requires the kind of unpacking that Perez does. One cannot just try to re-signify the meaning, but must rearticulate it, change the hue from colonial to decolonial, move the land from something that is used to project power for another to something that sustains and nurtures life.

On the surface of representation, Guam appears to exude American benevolence and excellence. It is a site of American victory over the Japanese in WWII. It is a base that has played a key role in every American conflict in the name of "freedom" and "democracy" in Asia and the Middle East since 1945. It is a minefield of American patriotism, where the largest holiday each year is "Liberation Day" meant to commemorate the American expulsion of the Japanese and celebrate America's ability to fight for freedom. Perez works hard, over the course of all three books, to challenge this particular false representation of Chamorros and their island by representing Guam not just as a place of American victories and patriotism, but also one inundated with Spam and brown tree snakes.

Spam and brown tree snakes don't signify glorious gain, but instead loss—the loss of beauty, health, vitality, sustainability. The brown tree snake is a pest that was brought into Guam accidentally by the US military, which led to the wiping out of most of the island's native bird population. In *[hacha]*, Perez provides an analogy between the death of a treasured relative and the arrival of the brown tree snake. In "descending plumeria," he places on the bottom of the page information on the brown tree snake and its deadly environmental impacts, as he recounts the loss of his cousin who created beautiful artwork that has faded over the years. In *[guma']*, several passages talk about the centrality of Spam to contemporary Chamorro culture. The meat came into the island after World War II, and, along with other lifestyle and diet changes, has led to numerous health problems for Chamorros.

This theoretical intervention is also found in *[saina]*. While Perez cites various texts that represent Chamorro patriotism and eager participation in the American war machine, he fills *[saina]* with the names of soldiers from Micronesia (Guåhan and the other islands around it) who have been killed while serving in America's "War of Terror." He crosses out the information that surrounds their names, as to how they died, leaving only their names untouched. It is a reminder to not be caught up in the metrics by which islanders sometimes judge themselves, as being small and not really mattering. Guåhan and the other islands in Micronesia boast both the highest rates of enlistment and also the highest killed-in-action statistics per capita. We are encouraged not to remember these names and these people in the context of their military service but as our neighbors and friends. Perez's critique exposes the cost of their participation and prompts us to understand that our island's forced participation may be too high.

Many would position Perez's work as being "diasporic." He articulates his own positionality as such, in the way he talks about his youth being spent in Guam, but formative years being spent in California and now Hawai'i. Many commentators would argue that the maps that he is developing are part of his reconnection to his "home." These maps are meant to help him and other Chamorros with feelings of lost identity find their "roots." But I would argue that his work

is far more than that. It is less a geographic journey, more a theoretical, temporal and even spiritual one. Much can be said of his spatial placement of words, *carmina figurata* or concrete poetry made to look like iconic forms such as the island of Guam or the latte, massive stone pillars upon which Chamorros of the past built their houses. But in those spatial arrangements there are temporal ones as well. The citations echo textual traces throughout time. On a single page you will find fragments of a number of different historical periods. You will find Chamorro mixed with Japanese, English, and even Spanish.

The journeys that we are meant to take through his texts are just as much through time and history as they are across oceans in the Pacific. The height of colonial commonsense is the linking of the possibility of the colonized subject to dependence on the colonizer. In Perez's poetry we delve into that history, seeing pieces with new eyes, to see past that dependency, where the maps don't take us back to the Pentagon, don't take us back to the Vatican, don't take us back to Magellan. It is important, however, not to conceive of these decolonial maps as being time traveling endeavors. They are meant to take us into the future, not the past. As we see Perez creating, with his ever-expanding archive of texts, we are meant to look past questions of who put us on the map or which maps we are on and which we aren't. We are meant to reflect on the ability we have to make our own maps, and regardless of the past or present, to decolonize and chart our own course into the future.

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