



POETRY FOUNDATION

PROSE FROM POETRY MAGAZINE

New Pacific Islander Poetry

BY CRAIG SANTOS PEREZ

We belong to Oceania. We belong to a diverse sea of moving islands, peoples, cultures, languages, and ecologies. We belong to a legacy of navigation that teaches us how to read the stars, waves, currents, winds, and horizons.

Pacific Islanders peopled Oceania thousands of years ago and developed complex societies based on the values of interconnection, harmony, balance, sustainability, and respect. We named and recognized the sacredness of waters and lands. We storied our new homes with songs, poems, and chants.

We have many names, indigenous and imposed: Hawaiian, Samoan, Chamorro, Tongan, Fijian, Marshallese, Tahitian, Tokelauan, Māori, Palauan, Kosraean, Pohnpeian, Chuukese, Yapese, I-Kiribati, Papua New Guinean, Solomon Islander, Ni-Vanuatu, and more.



Beginning in the sixteenth century, the violent storms of imperialism conquered, missionized, claimed, diseased, and divided Oceania into Polynesia, Micronesia, and Melanesia (many islands, tiny islands, and black islands). Foreign militaries dispossessed islanders from ancestral lands and waters, and poisoned our environments through weapons testing, training, and storage. Tourism and urban development paved over once abundant green spaces and waterways to construct hotels, shopping malls, restaurants, skyscrapers, condominiums, and parking lots. Colonial governments, school systems, and media outlets privileged and mandated colonial languages, literatures, and cultures while suppressing and devaluing indigenous knowledges. Corporate agriculture and plantations (sugar, coffee, pineapple, and GMO seeds) replaced native agriculture and aquaculture so that Hawai‘i, for example, now imports 90 percent of its meats, produce, and products. As a result, Pacific customs have been pushed to the brink of extinction, and islanders endure high rates of poverty, disease, incarceration, depression, suicide, unemployment, and houselessness.

Fortunately, the story of Oceania is not simply a story about demise and endangerment. Our story also heralds native resilience and revitalization. Anti-colonial struggles have occurred since first contact, though the most fervent era of decolonization began in the sixties when many islands achieved political independence and islanders began to reclaim

our indigenous identities. This sparked pan-Pacific movements for demilitarization, decolonization, denuclearization, and sovereignty, as well as movements for native rights to land, water, housing, education, and cultural practices.

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For over a century, the United States has been — and continues to be — an imperial archipelago stretching from the Atlantic to the Pacific. American whaling ships, missionaries, corporations, and soldiers infiltrated the Pacific in the nineteenth century. By the dawn of the twentieth century, the American empire expanded its territory, annexing the Hawaiian islands in the central Pacific, the island of Guam in the western Pacific, and the eastern Samoan islands in the south Pacific. These places were considered “strategic” because they possessed deep harbors for use as naval stations and enough land for use as airstrips and military bases. After the devastation of WWII, islands in the western Pacific that were previously controlled by Japan became the “Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands,” administered by the United States. Today, these places have various political relationships to the federal government. Hawai‘i is the fiftieth state of the union; Guam and American Samoa are unincorporated territories; the Northern Mariana Islands are a commonwealth; and the Republic of Palau and the Marshall Islands, as well as the Federated States of Micronesia, are freely associated states.

American imperialism also opened migration routes. In the nineteenth century, islanders joined whaling ships, settled along the West Coast, participated in the gold rush and the fur trade, and even fought in the American Civil War. In the twentieth century, many islanders were drafted or enlisted in the military, which continues to be a major vessel of Pacific migration. Others migrated for schools, jobs, health care, sports, religion, and affordable housing. Tragically, more and more islanders are migrating because climate change has made their islands uninhabitable. A new generation of islanders has been born away from their ancestral islands, learning about their histories through stories, books, or the internet. In many cases, diasporic populations outnumber their on-island kin.

The 2010 US census counted 1.2 million Pacific Islanders and noted that we are one of the fastest growing population groups. While 70 percent of us live in Hawai'i and the western part of the US, you can find us in every state and territory. For example, at least thirteen thousand Pacific Islanders live in Illinois, the home state of *Poetry* magazine. No matter where we live, we carry stories of origins and destinations, arrivals and departures, loss and triumph.



We belong to a deep tradition of oral storytelling, chant, and song. Additionally, we belong to a vibrant legacy of visual arts and literatures,

including tattooing, weaving, carving, petroglyphy, architecture, canoe building, fashion, and floral arts. Alphabetic writing, textual reading, and printing technologies were introduced by missionaries and colonial governments. Islanders appropriated these new technologies to produce early religious tracts and nonfiction texts (newspapers, histories, autobiographies, and ethnographies), as well as what we recognize as contemporary Pacific literature written in colonial, indigenous, and creole languages.

In the sixties and seventies, students and faculty at the newly established University of Papua New Guinea and the University of the South Pacific in Fiji studied, wrote, and published decolonial poetry and stories in broadsides, chapbooks, zines, anthologies, and full-length collections. Other centers of Pacific poetry emerged later around universities in Aotearoa (New Zealand), Australia, Hawai‘i, Samoa, Tahiti, Tonga, Guam, and other islands. Today, several Pacific writers, such as Albert Wendt, Witi Ihimaera, Patricia Grace, and Sia Figiel, have become internationally renowned, and their texts have been translated into multiple languages and media (including film). Pacific literature courses are taught in high schools and colleges throughout Oceania, and there are publishers and literary journals dedicated wholly to Pacific writing. Several dissertations, theses, essays, and monographs have focused on the history, theory, and aesthetics of Pacific literature. The founding of book festivals, reading series, open mics, spoken word slams, writing

workshops, humanities councils, author retreats, and literary conferences have created a dynamic Pacific literary scene.

On one hand, a major thread of Pacific poetry documents, critiques, and laments the legacy and ongoing impacts of colonialism. Poems address issues related to social injustice, economic dispossession, militarization, nuclearism, plantationism, disease, tourism, urbanization, racism, homophobia, and environmental degradation. Conversely, another thread of Pacific poetry celebrates the decolonization and revitalization of native Pacific cultures, nations, customs, languages, kinship networks, histories, politics, and identities. In terms of form, Pacific poetry draws from a range of styles, including formalism, free verse, projectivism, ecopoetics, documentary, avant-garde, postmodernism, beat, confessionalism, surrealism, visual poetry, video poetry, protest poetics, spoken word, performance, conceptualism, queer poetics, multicultural poetics, multilingualism, and more. Pacific poetry is as diverse as the cultures of Oceania.



Representations of Oceania and Pacific Islanders in the American political, historical, and literary imagination have changed over time. The Pacific Ocean has been viewed as an empty, virgin space awaiting American exploitation and power. Our islands have been seen as tropical paradises, stepping stones, unsinkable military bases, Hollywood sets, or

scientific and agricultural laboratories. Pacific Islanders have been represented as violent, primitive, hyper-sexual, exotic, childlike, cannibalistic, dependent, noble, athletic, hyper-masculine, uncivilized, and hospitable. Much of Pacific poetry aims to challenge these stereotypes and humanize our bodies.

As Pacific populations continue to grow, we have become more visible to the American mainstream. A number of islanders have achieved celebrity in the American film, television, music, restaurant, and sports industries. The federal government celebrates Asian Pacific American Heritage Month every May, facilitating a wide array of events that raise awareness about Pacific lives and experiences. Pacific cultural, educational, and advocacy groups have formed in many states.

More than ever before, the national news media has covered Pacific issues, partly because of the connection President Obama has to Hawai‘i, but also because of the current administration’s assertion that the twenty-first century is “America’s Pacific Century.” The cornerstone of this foreign policy “pivot” is the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a secretive trade agreement that aims to weaken unions, labor laws, environmental protections, product safety laws, and corporate taxes; expand multinational corporate investment in pharmaceuticals, GMOs, terrestrial and deep-sea mining, offshore oil drilling, fisheries, logging, defense contractors, tourism, and cyber security; and increase US

militarization throughout the region. Global trade watch groups have described the TPP as “NAFTA on steroids.”

Relatedly, the Pacific is trending on various media because of the devastating effects of climate change, including rising sea levels and drought; intensified earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and hurricanes; coral reef bleaching; ocean acidification and warming; and increased disease, die-off, and extinction. All of which is dramatically changing habitability thresholds in Oceania and challenging our ability to mitigate change and adapt.

While these issues may not be familiar to many Americans, this forms the very context out of which Pacific poets write. Indeed, the interconnections between Oceania and the United States, and between Americans and Pacific Islanders, can no longer be ignored. I invite you to learn more about the histories and cultures of the Pacific by reading our literatures, listening to our voices, recognizing our strength and humanity, empathizing with our struggles, and supporting our fight.



This special folio aims to introduce readers to Pacific Islander poetry and poetics via a modest selection of new poems by a diverse range of poets from different parts of Oceania and the Pacific diaspora, as well as from different generations. Additionally, this folio includes a group of book reviews by graduate students at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa that

examine several Pacific collections. For a more comprehensive survey of Pacific Islander poets, I worked with the Poetry Foundation to create [an online resource that features a robust series of links to authors and essays](#). I am grateful to Don Share of *Poetry* magazine for his support and to the Poetry Foundation for the opportunity.

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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* (Hawai'i Dub Machine, 2011), and author of three collections of poetry: *from unincorporated territory [hacha]* (Tinfish Press, 2008), *from unincorporated territory [saina]* (Omnidawn, 2010),...

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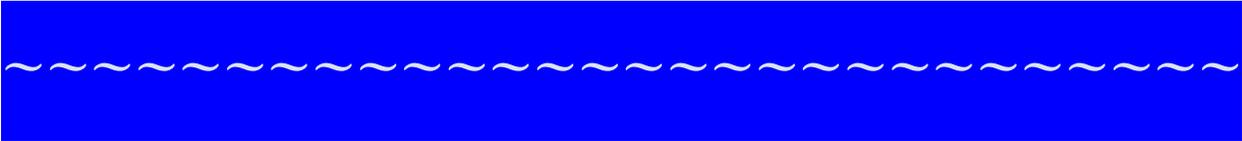
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Praise song for Oceania

(on June 8, 2016, World Oceans Day)

Ocean, we // had been your griot. (Brenda Hillman)



praise

your capacity

for birth / your fluid

currents and trenchant

darkness / praise your contracting
waves & dilating
horizons / praise our briny
beginning, the source
of every breath / praise
your endless bio-
diversity / praise
your capacity
for renewal / your rise
into clouds and descent
into rain / praise your underground
aquifers / your rivers & lakes,
ice sheets & glaciers / praise
your watersheds &
hydrologic cycles / praise
your capacity
to endure / the violence
of those who claim dominion
over you / who map you

empty ocean to pillage / who divide you
into latitudes & longitudes /
who scar your middle
passages / who exploit
your economy* / praise
your capacity
to survive / our trawling
boats / breaching /
your open body /
& taking from your
collapsing depths / praise
your capacity
to dilute / our sewage
& radioactive waste /
our pollutants & plastics /
our heavy metals
& greenhouse gases / praise
your capacity
to bury / soldiers & terrorists,

slaves & refugees / to bury
our last breath
of despair / to bury
the ashes of our
loved ones / praise
your capacity
to remember / praise
your library of drowned
stories / praise your museum
of lost treasures / praise
our migrant routes
& submarine roots / praise
your capacity
to penetrate /
praise your rising tides
& relentless storms & towering
tsunamis & feverish
floods / praise
your capacity

to smother /
schools of fish & wash them
ashore to save them
from our cruelty /
to show us what we're
no longer allowed to take
/ to starve us like your corals
are being starved & bleached /
like your liquid lungs
choked of oxygen / praise
your capacity
to forgive / please
forgive our territorial hands
& acidic breath / please
forgive our nuclear arms
& naval bodies / please
forgive our concrete dams
& cabling veins / please
forgive our deafening sonar

& lustful tourisms / please
forgive our invasive drilling
& deep sea mining / please
forgive our extractions
& trespasses / praise
your capacity
for mercy / please
let our grandfathers and fathers
catch just one more fish / please
make it stop raining soon / please
make it rain soon / please
spare our fragile farms & fruit trees / please
spare our low-lying islands & atolls / please
spare our coastal villages & cities / please
let us cross safely to a land
without war / praise
your capacity
for hope /
praise your rainbow

warrior & peace
boat / your hokule'a
& sea shepherd / praise
your arctic sunrise & flotillas
of hope / praise your nuclear free
& independent pacific movement /
praise your marine stewardship
councils & sustainable
fisheries / praise your radical
seafarers & native navigators /
praise your sacred water walkers /
praise your activist kayaks
& canoes / praise your ocean
conservancies & surfrider foundations /
praise your aquanauts & hydrolabs /
praise your coastal cleanups
& Google Oceans /
praise your whale hunting
& shark finning bans /

praise your sanctuaries
& no take zones / praise
your pharmacopeia of new
antibiotics / praise your wave
and tidal energy / praise your
#oceanoptimism & Ocean
Elders /praise
your capacity
for echo
location / our names for you /
that translate
into creation stories
& song maps
tasi & kai & tai & moana nui & vasa &
tahi & lik & wai tui & daob & wonsolwara /
praise
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 / .¹

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t6fmeBerLZc&t=11s>)

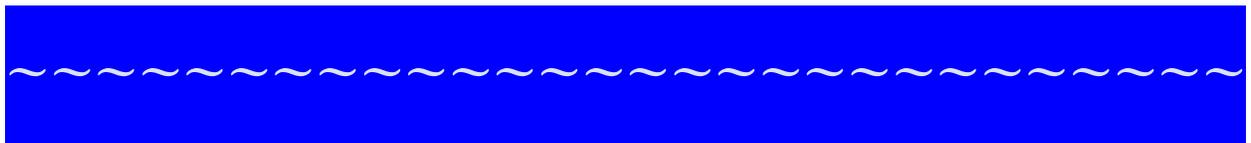
Notes on contributor

Craig Santos Perez is a native Chamorro from the Pacific Island of Guam. He is the editor of two anthologies of Pacific literature, and he is the author of three books, most recently from unincorporated territory [guma'], which received an American Book Award in 2015. He is an associate professor in

the English department at the University of Hawai'i, Mānoa, where he teaches creative writing, Pacific literature, and eco-poetry.

Notes

1 Phrases are quoted from or inspired by various scholars and poets, including Epeli Hau'ofa, Derek Walcott, Elizabeth DeLoughrey, Rob Wilson, Peter Neill, Sylvia Earle, Édouard Glissant, and Albert Wendt. The words chanted are the words for ocean in various Pacific languages. The epigraph is from Brenda Hillman's poem, "The Pacific Ocean," from her book *Practical Water* (Wesleyan University Press, 2009), 26. The gross marine product of the ocean is 2.5 trillion dollars.





From “understory”

BY CRAIG SANTOS PEREZ

for my pregnant wife, nālani, during her second trimester

nālani and

i walk

to our

small community

garden plot

in mānoa —

the seed

packets in

my pocket

sound like

a baby's

toy rattle —

when do

they spray

glyphosate along

the sidewalks?

from kunia

to waimea,

fifty thousand

acres of

gmo fields —

how will

open air

pesticide drift

affect our

unborn daughter,

whose nerve

endings are

just beginning

to root? —

we plant

seeds in

rows, soil

gathers under

our fingernails —

syngenta, dupont,

dow, pioneer,

basf, monsanto

\$240 million

seed sector —

corn for

cattle feed

and syrup —

runoff turns

[our] streams

red — poisons

lo'i — 50,000

heart sea

urchins die off —

what will

our daughter

be able

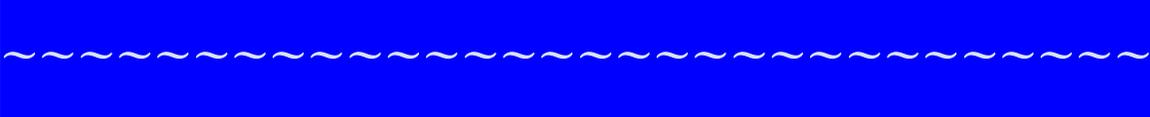
to plant

in this

paradise of

fugitive dust —

Source: Poetry (January 2016)



DA MAINLAND TO ME

Eh, howzit brah,
I heard you going mainland, eh?

No, I going to da continent.

Wat? I taught you going San Jose
foa visit your braddah?

Dats right.

Den you going mainland brah!

No, I going to da continent.

Wat you mean continent brah?!
Da mainland is da mainland,
dats weah you going, eh?!

Eh, like I told you,
dats da continent-

Hawai'i
is da mainland to me.



POETRY FOUNDATION

from *Lisiensan Ga'lago*

BY CRAIG SANTOS PEREZ

“goaam” ~

“goam” ~

“islas de las velas latinas” (of lateen sails ~

“guan”

“guana” ~

“islas de los ladrones” (of the thieves ~

“guåhan”

“guajan” ~

“islas marianas”

(after the spanish queen ~

“bahan”

“guhan” ~

“guacan”

“isla de san juan” ~

“guaon”

“y guan”

“omiya jima”

(great shrine island)

“guam”

“the first province

of the great ocean” ~

geographic absence ~

“the old census records show”

because who can stand on the reef
and name that below water and sky

imagined territory ~

“a spanish baptismal name and”

burnt villages

archipelago of

“chamoru last names drawn from
the lexicon of everyday language”

bone

carved word

~

“it is possible they changed
their last names throughout their lives”

remade : sovereign

Craig Santos Perez, "from *Lisiensan Ga'lago*" from *From Unincorporated Territory [gumá]*.
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