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[2020 Winner] The Power of Guinaiya: The Intersections of Love and Resistance Through the Native Chamoru Voice

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The Power of Guinaiya:

The Intersections of Love and Resistance through the Native Chamoru Voice

“*Guam: Where America’s Day Begins.*” A slogan that every Chamoru knows, one that makes me think of sunrises and early drives through Hagåtña with my mom and Nana. I’ve only been to Guåhan¹ twice, but each time I feel the ground differently. Beneath my feet, I feel the land, *i tano’*, meet the sea, *i tasi’*. When the waves crash into my ankles, I feel what my Nana must have felt at my age, right before she left home for the mainland with a nice white man who was soon to become my Papa. I can imagine the brown eyes of my Nana and her six other siblings as children looking up at the cloudy sky, feeling the rain water stick to their skin in the heat. I long to learn the histories of my familia and those that came before them to preserve their memories for generations to come. When I look at my Nana, I know in my heart that I will always find peace knowing that because of her, I am connected to Guåhan and to her legacy forever.

I look in the mirror and turn my fâsa² from side to side, noticing that I have my Nana’s skin, her lips, her strong cheekbones. I glance down at my legs and smile knowing that my entire family has the same strong calves, but Nana can out-wear any of us in a pair of shorts. I love holding her hand and feeling how soft she feels, noticing that even with the six x’s carved into her arm from the concentration camp, her skin is the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen. It is brown like the earth of her mother’s house in Mong Mong, it is warm like the rays of sun peeking through the storm clouds, it is the skin that she passed down to her neni³ who were always championed for their *exotic* beauty.

¹ Chamoru word for *Guam*

² Fâsa: *face*

³ Neni: *baby*

I used to love that term, *exotic*. It made me feel like I was winning something, something that made me feel both the same and different from the others. “*You look so exotic, what are you?*” This is a question I used to look forward to hearing from the parents of friends or partners. I never thought it bothered me until I got to college and started meeting other mixed women, finding similarities in our stories and experiences of being hyper-sexualized and eroticized at very young ages. We’d laugh at the cringey stories each of us told of white men we’d dated whose parents thought it to be exciting that their son brought home an “exotic beauty.” Laughing at the caucacity (or white person audacity) of young white men with my best friend, Ruby. We’d laugh about the date I went on once with a guy who felt compelled to ask if this was my natural skin color or if I spray-tanned, or if I was short-tempered and “spicy”. With my answer, he then prompted the single most loathed question by any person of mixed-ethnic background: “*Well, what are you then?*”

What *am* I? A question worth some digging. According to the elders of my family, I’ve been told we are quarters of Czech, German, Scottish, and Chamoru descent. I’d be so curious to learn more about my European cultures but something has always pulled me to my deeply rooted native Chamoru side, mostly because it is the most unknown to the general public. The islands of Micronesia and the Northern Marianas are their own special collection of islands in the Pacific and are mainly overlooked in media and education. I think this is what draws me to discover more about this side of myself, as I was born and raised in California and I am still learning of my ancestral lineage to the Marianas. I want to share the indigenous history of my rich, vibrant culture and help people understand that although it is small in size, we are a resilient and dynamic people worth bringing to the forefront in U.S. political and social discussion.

Native Chamorus have a long history of fighting for their independence and sovereignty, one that continues today. Over the last five centuries, we have endured Spanish, Japanese, and American colonization that has resulted in a loss of history, language, and identity with our cultural heritage. Today, Guåhan remains an unincorporated territory of the United States, allowing the people of Guåhan to be citizens of the good ole' U.S. of A... with a catch, of course. While they can participate in local elections, their votes for the electoral college are not counted. Guåhan is a place where the American dollar is stretched at the naval base commissary because everything is cheaper and more accessible to those with military I.D.s. Guåhan is a place where 30% of its 212 square miles is possessed by the U.S. military and even our most sacred ancient and culturally significant sites cannot be accessed without proper authorization. Guåhan is a place with dying coral reefs and increased populations leading to environmental destruction. The U.S. Department of Defense (D.O.D.) claims they're doing their part to focus on environmental stewardship, but ecologists and indigenous activists have always had a nose for bureaucratic absurdity.

Guåhan is the place where indigenous activism has been overlooked and underrepresented by the U.S. military and it's time to restore the social and environmental balance of the island and our culture. It is time to put inafa'maolek⁴ first before corporate interest and military gain. Like other indigenous populations, many native Chamoru have channeled the power of storytelling into their activism as a basis for reclaiming and strengthening the identities and communities that have been stripped from them by western military greed. As an act of storytelling and self-care, many activists have adopted the practice of poetry and spoken word to tell their own stories and reclaim the history of Guåhan on their

⁴ Inafa'maolek: to restore balance, to make things good for each other, social and environmental interdependence

terms. Through powerful language and expression, Chamoru activists are directing awareness toward political, environmental, and cultural topics that have been compromised by the U.S. military's unwavering hunger for control. In this piece, I will address several historical periods and events that led to contemporary acts of indigenous resistance through the power of poetic expression.

A Brief History of Colonization on Guåhan

*Guam is Where Western Imperialism in the Pacific Begins!*⁵

Guåhan and its people are not unfamiliar with the brutal reality of unsolicited western colonization. On March 5, 1521, Ferdinand Magellan docked his ships into Humåtak Bay and deemed the island to follow Spanish rule as a colony. This was the beginning of Spanish influence in the Chamoru way of life. This is why my Nana's maiden name is San Nicolas and why over 50 percent of the Chamoru language is of Spanish origin. Guåhan was the first location in the Pacific to have a Roman Catholic mission and an established European colony that altered the religious, social, and cultural practices and traditions we find most common on Guåhan today ("Guam's Seven Historical Eras" 3). For over 300 years, Guåhan remained under Spanish rule that resulted in the demolition of over 90 percent of the native Chamoru population (Herman 2). The Chamoru people lost more than just numbers; through this decimation, they lost ancient connections to their land, native tongue, and cultural practices. While it was clear that the Chamoru way of life was being altered significantly, indigenous storytelling continued to help share their history with generations to come.

⁵ All italicized headings referenced from *Lukao* (2017) by Craig Santos Perez

Guam is Where America's Western Frontier Begins!

By 1848, the Spanish were comfortably using Guåhan as another central hub in the Pacific. In that same year, the United States had obtained California from Mexico through the notion of “manifest destiny”— an American rationale for vigorous expansionism. In 1898, the Spanish-American War led to the arrival of the USS Charleston on Guåhan soil and the ultimate surrender of Guåhan from Spain to the U.S. through the Treaty of Paris (Herman 3). As a newly unincorporated U.S. colony, Chamorus were again displaced on their land. New governmental rules and regulations were established and forced the native population to adapt to yet another outsider’s demands. The island was then placed under the authority of the Secretary of the Navy who was awarded absolute control and governance of Guåhan and the Chamoru people. Through the strict command of the U.S. naval administration, Guåhan soon became an indispensable asset to the D.O.D. and “was run like a well-ordered battleship under what was essentially martial law” (Herman 3). The D.O.D. had their eyes set on the prize— obtaining Guåhan under American rule meant the U.S. had an extension in a “strategic” geopolitical location in the Southeast Pacific.

Through the U.S. Naval Era that lasted from 1898 to 1941, it was clearly stated to the Chamoru that they were now outsiders on their land. According to Chamoru scholar Dr. Anne Perez Hattori, they became “...wards of the U.S. Navy, devoid of any political protections or inherent rights and simply something to be molded by the United States” (Bevacqua 4). Although some scholars note improvements in economic, healthcare, and educational systems, Dr. Perez Hattori counters these notions and instead declares that this colonial conquest marks a period of intense racism and aberrant authoritarianism on native Chamoru people and culture. Throughout this period, the indigenous population experienced even more physical, emotional,

and spiritual displacement that forced a quickly changing new way of life for the native community. The island and its people were being commodified and forgotten, passing down trauma that would last for generations. Yet in true Chamoru spirit, these hardships would strengthen and rejuvenate their fight to protect and defend guma` : *home*.

Guam is Where America's Logic of Territorial Incorporation Begins!

On December 8, 1941, the Japanese empire attacked Guåhan from the air and the sea. The Japanese attacked the small American colony and gained total control of the island. The natives faced physical and emotional brutality, were forced into hard, unpaid manual labor, and were herded like carabao into tiny, dirty concentration camps. Here was yet another displacement on the soil from which their bodies were made. In 1944, after three brutal years of war, the Americans arrived to steal back the land they stole and perhaps recruit a few natives along the way. Guåhan was *reclaimed* by the U.S. and the ism's boomed; militarism, commercialism, expansionism, marry-a-pretty-brown-Chamorríta-and-take-her-to-the-mainland-ism. Guåhan became a central hub for growing military interests in the Pacific and the D.O.D. started shipping over men in uniform like they were restocking SPAM in a Pay-Less.

Sitting In History

Do you know what it's like to sit in a history class
listening to your professor talk about one colonizer
after the other
Countries that hung their flags
and told our people that we were under their control
Us not knowing that we would lost control of everything we knew
Our people's ways of living were forever altered
tainted by the colonizers' (plural)
bibles, crosses, churches, SPAM, chocolate, McDonald's, militarism

- Kisha Borja-Kicho`cho`

Do you remember learning about the invasion of Guåhan in school? I sure don't and would know nothing if it hadn't been for my imprisoned grandmother's stolen childhood. Not many people remember the invasion of Guåhan because Pearl Harbor was devastating enough, Americans couldn't handle yet another heartbreaking reality of their people, and they didn't have to because Chamorus didn't matter as full U.S. citizens then and they hardly matter now to the United States of American Colonizers. The U.S. erases parts of history that doesn't paint them in pretty shades of red, white, and blue. Yet many Chamorus still have a strong sense of American pride and support the military full heartedly. Many islanders are grateful for U.S. intervention post World War II, but one's vision cannot be clouded by stars and stripes and the promise of the American dream.

I come from a family of veterans; mom served in the Army, Papa was in the Navy, Uncle Gene was in the Air Force, cousin Carlos is a Marine. While I am thankful to my family for their service, I recognize that the U.S. military as a system is infected with white supremacy. They feed themselves on the heterosexist corporate dime. Guåhan became more commonly known as USS Guam and U.S. military presence has heavily increased over the years. The trauma endured by native Chamorus pours over onto the earth as construction sites pop up to build a new Marine Corps base over precious ancestral land in Pâgat Village, destroying endangered native species and turning that sacred land into a shooting range. This (de)struction will be completed by 2025 and despite the brutal treatment of the Chamoru people by oppressive military action, the people of Guåhan will not be silenced.

“Family Trees”

“When you take,” my dad says, “take with gratitude, and never more than what you need.”

He teaches me the phrase, “eminent domain,”
which means “theft,” means “to turn a place
of abundance into a base of destruction.”
The military uprooted trees with bulldozers,
paved the fertile earth with concrete, and planted
toxic chemicals and ordinances in the ground.
Barbed wire fences spread like invasive vines,
whose only fruit are the cancerous tumors
that bloom on every branch of our family tree.
- Craig Santos Perez

A Journey Toward Self-determination

After the Americans recaptured Guåhan from the Japanese, many Chamorus were filled with gratitude and appreciation toward the United States. Chamorus and Americans alike were elated that the war was over and looked forward to a new future, with vivid dreams of freedom and the tangible possibility to achieve the *American Dream*. But like many other brown bodies across the U.S., life would not be free of oppression and manipulation, even after something as celebratory as the resolution of the Second World War. It seems to be forgotten that Guåhan is an island that gave birth to its people and that it is more than just a convenient outpost base for nuclear weapons and barbed-wire fences, containing sweaty men in uniform telling the island’s flesh and blood to get off *their* land. Post-World War II, Chamoru leaders of Guåhan sought to push for a properly organized civilian government and citizenship rights for the people of Guåhan. In 1949, Chamoru leaders participated in the Guam Congress Walkout as a protest against the U.S. Naval Government (Babauta 2). This nonviolent act displayed the determination and resilience of Chamoru leaders and proved their devotion to achieving social justice and political autonomy.

Throughout each period of American colonization, Guåhan had only experienced appointed U.S. Naval officers as governor of the island. Until 1950, Guåhan and the Chamoru people remained military property without properly defined and protected rights and liberties

(Viernes 2). Congress passed the Organic Act of Guam in August of 1950 after being pressured by Chamoru leaders in the Guam Congress Walkout. This act granted Chamorus and other inhabitants of the island U.S. citizenship and Guåhan officially became an unincorporated territory of the United States. In the decades to come, Chamoru leaders of Guåhan began to work towards gaining more political power by running for elected office. Through this type of political agency, community leaders sought to reclaim the identities that had been overlooked and stripped from them under several accounts of western colonization and militarization.

The 1960s and 70s proved to be an especially crucial time in world politics and social action that led to more widespread acts of agency from historically marginalized groups. In 1972, Carlos Camacho became the first publicly elected governor of Guåhan which led to further Chamoru political participation. Toward the late 1960s, local activists and politicians began to reassess the Organic Act at the first Constitutional Convention. Forty-three delegates sought to create possible new amendments to the Organic Act but were essentially unacknowledged by Congress. Although these efforts went mostly unnoticed by the U.S. government, it sparked a new conversation between activists, politicians, and locals about the political, economic, and environmental future of Guåhan (Tolentino 3).

During the late 1970s, ideas for a newly drafted constitution for Guåhan caused great deliberation amongst the island's leaders and activist organizations. After reassessment of the Organic Act, multiple flaws were found that restricted Guåhan's overall political self-determination by disallowing its people to dictate their own affairs appropriately. Instead of creating a constitution that simply amended some of the flaws found in the Organic Act, several activist organizations advocated for an entirely new constitution that propelled Chamoru agency past the mere status quo. Widespread disputes regarding this decision ultimately resulted in a

draft constitution that was rejected by a majority of island voters. Although this created a bump in the road toward self-determination, political leaders and activists persisted in shedding light on the restraints Guåhan faces as an unincorporated U.S. territory (Viernes 5).

As a result of the efforts made by Chamoru leaders in the 1970s, the Commission on Self-Determination was established in 1980 to inform and educate the public of their power and ability to change their political status and conduct a plebiscite for Chamoru self-determination. Tensions began to rise after questioning who should be allowed to participate in a plebiscite that could possibly alter the future of Guåhan's political status (Tolentino 4). Today, conversations surrounding indigenous rights continue to be disregarded and neglected by non-native residents and politicians alike due to the discomfort surrounding race and indigenous sovereignty. Self-determination can be a symbolic and empowering process for native populations because it encourages their voices and demands to become louder and stronger ("Independent Guåhan" 00:00:32-00:00:58) To rewrite and reclaim its history, "Guåhan needs decolonization not as a simple metaphor for change but as an actual process of removing American colonialism from a community" (Bevacqua & Naputi 4). It forces outside communities to see that western imperialism is still suffocating the livelihoods, languages, cultures, and lands of native populations. Implementing a self-determination plebiscite on Guåhan will aid in the reformation and reclamation of the island's rightful inhabitants: the Chamoru people.

Through the course of the 20th century, many Chamoru leaders and activists have worked tirelessly to change their political status and reclaim the land, people, and cultural traditions that have been overlooked and forgotten by the U.S Congress and the Department of Defense. As we propel into the 21st century, military buildup on Guåhan has created more tensions with indigenous and environmental activists as more ancestral land has been stripped from the people

of Guåhan. Now that more activist organizations have emerged, it is hard to ignore the social, environmental, and cultural impact of increased military presence and “ownership” of over 30% of the island. These organizations seek to raise awareness about indigenous rights and social activism to spark new conversations with the upcoming generations of Chamorus across the Marianas and beyond.

The Power of Guinaiya

“I got my mind made up
About where I wanna be
Can’t nobody take my home from me.
There is no place like home,
Sen guaiya hao, Guåhan.”
-Inetnon Gef’pago

Guåhan is guma`. It is a land that provides for its children and it is trying to survive. The people of Guåhan and the Marianas are tired, they are tired of being deemed as unimportant according to the U.S. military. They are tired of having to constantly fight to keep their culture, language, and island alive, despite a constant western attack on their way of life. Although they are tired, the hunger for justice, sovereignty, and independence propels their activism and strengthens the love that is ingrained into our culture. Without love, there isn’t a shot at defeating the darkness that threatens the land that gave birth to our beautiful culture and people. Without love, fear and destruction wins. Through the power of love and expression in art and activism, we can educate and inform the people of Guåhan and the rest of the world that our island, our native tongue, our histories, and our future can be preserved and strengthened to reclaim the identities that were stolen. It is an uphill battle, but through the powerful words and sentiments behind literary activism, the voices of indigenous storytellers and activists cannot be silenced.

Literary activism can mean many things to many different people. It can stem from the unique experiences of an individual because it encapsulates personal thoughts or emotions related to a particular event or set of events. To some poets, literary activism can mean opportunity or curiosity within a particular subject. Others, it relates to who the storyteller is, what that story is about, and the accessibility of that story (King 5). This type of activism is necessary because it provokes conversations and engages accountability within the community. It allows a space for individuals and communities to be heard and heal from previous or current traumas and offers a new template for (re)creating the poet's own story. According to the native Chamoru poet and activist Craig Santos Perez, "poetry, for me, has been an extension of this activism, a creative outlet through which to express and circulate my politics, and to inspire others to be involved" (Vizzo 5). The significance behind the written and spoken word can be deeply empowering to historically underrepresented communities.

In various collections of poems and scholarly contributions, Perez seeks to expose the environmental consequences of westernization, increased military presence, and capitalistic prioritization on Guåhan and other Pacific nations (Briggs 60). Because his work has a strong correlation to environmental sustainability, Perez demonstrates the connection between indigenous values, the earth, and all living beings. Another major theme in his work is the ability poetry has to uplift communities that have been disempowered by the military and other oppressive systems in place under U.S. jurisdiction. Perez also seeks to include the Chamoru language into his work, providing little to no translations for the reader. This encourages the reader to decolonize the poetic spaces that are historically white and Eurocentric, challenging English as the default language in contemporary written work. It is clear that his passion stems

from an unwavering love for his home island and culture and he emphasizes the importance of unity between island nations, as a united Pacific is a stronger Pacific.

ECL (English as a Colonial Language, an abecedarian)
American authorities
banned
Chamoru language to manifest
Destiny :
English enforced at the empire's
frontier of "freedom."
Guahan means "we
have," but what is home-
island if silenced by the violent
jingoism of an unjust
klepto-settler state — if
language is stolen from our living
mouths &
nouns reduced to nothing — if
oceanic throats &
pasifika palates are pacified,
quiet like *i halom tano* '
ravaged by brown tree
snakes who swallowed *i*
totot, sihek, åga...
until ancestral
vowels & consonants, once avian
Wild, now
xtirpated—
yielding to the colonial
zoo of endangered tongues.

- Craig Santos Perez

As one of the most prominent activist organizations on the island, the work of Independent Guåhan advocates for an independent future with total self-determination and sustainability for Guåhan and its people. In April 2020, the organization coordinated an online platform for poets and artists across the island and U.S. to come together and share their work to enlighten and empower communities directly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. This live-

stream event allowed Chamoru voices an outlet to share poems written during the first 14 days of the island-wide stay-at-home order, shedding light on new concerns relating to spiked infection rates on military bases and the impact it has on native and manåmko⁶ populations ("Fanachu Podcast" 00:00:00- 01:31:48). Through compelling poetic storytelling, the participants connected through the land, the language, and the future of Guåhan's livelihood post-pandemic. Though the COVID-19 pandemic poses challenges and threats to the island and its future, the people of Guåhan are resilient. Utilizing an online platform for poetry readings and thoughtful dialogue allows communities to relate personal experiences with more contemporary political action: all through the power of poetic voice electrified by guinaiya.

Poetry can be used as a powerful tool in activism and also can act as a method of self-care for one's mental and physical wellbeing. The relationship that we nurture for ourselves will only strengthen and revitalize the ones we have with others and the world. Putting a pen to paper and unleashing one's feelings of grief, impatience, anger, joy, confusion, and pride is both fulfilling and essential to continue the hard work that everyday life presents to the people of Guåhan and for marginalized individuals everywhere. It allows space for both growth and rest for activists everywhere who are putting their heart and souls into their work. For Craig Santos Perez, "poetry is like the ocean: it has no end, only unknown depths, contracting waves, and dilating horizons" (Vizzo 5,6).

The Chamoru people have endured centuries of colonization from numerous nations that have majorly affected the prosperity of Guåhan, its inhabitants, and the surrounding islands in Micronesia. Increased militarization on Guåhan has led to the loss and destruction of native ecosystems on sacred ancestral land that threatens the future of the island's natural resources,

⁶ Manåmko⁶: elders

cultural landmarks, and quality of life for all living creatures. In efforts to fight for a free and independent Guåhan, local organizations and artists have utilized their platforms to advocate for self-determination and the decolonization of the Northern Marianas and all colonized lands in the Pacific.

Through powerful language and expression, Chamoru activists have utilized poetry to bring awareness to current political, social, environmental, and cultural issues that have resulted from military greed and Western neglect. This type of literary activism in indigenous communities can transcend oppressive borders related to race, class, and socioeconomic status. It has the power to express emotion, tell stories, and preserve histories for past, present, and future generations. For the Chamoru people, the power of storytelling keeps our *tåotaomo'na siha*, those who lived before us, alive. For me, it has ignited a deeper connection to my past, present, and future as a Chamoru. It is what feeds our souls and nourishes our minds to strengthen our resilience to fight for an independent, free Guåhan.

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