

# Chapter 1

## Decolonizing Guam With Poetry: “Everyday Objects With Mission” in Craig Santos Perez’s Poetry

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Craig Santos Perez, poet and activist from Guam, uses his poetry to call attention to the negative effects of colonialism and militarization on his homeland and the Pacific. He reminds his readers of the mistreatment of his people the Chamorros, the special “unincorporated” status of Guam and the land that is taken over little by little by the US Army. His poems reveal information about the life circumstances of the author’s community and respond to, as well as critique, the colonial conditions of Guam. This study looks at everyday objects mentioned in Perez’s poetry and seeks to unfold the “mission” of these objects. “Everyday objects” do not only refer to traditional objects, but also, to modern objects (borrowed from western culture) which relate to the everyday life of the Indigenous people of Guam. The argument of this research is that ordinary objects, which have significance in Pacific culture, are deliberately placed in the poems by Perez. They convey the message of resistance, decolonial protest and pursuit of survival and can be considered as representations of activism.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Literature is an important platform for speaking up against injustice. Activism and Indigenous literature are often connected and Indigenous authors write as a political act. Craig Santos Perez, poet and activist from Guam, uses his poetry to call attention to the negative effects of colonialism and militarization on his homeland and throughout the Pacific. In his poetry, he constantly reminds his readers of the mistreatment of his people the Chamorros, the special status of his home country (an “unincorporated territory” of the United States of America) and the disappearing land that is taken over little by little by the US Army. Guam is a strategically important place for the US Navy due to its central location in the Pacific Ocean. However, it is rarely talked about in the media and generally presented as a holiday

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paradise, and not as an important military base it is. It is invisible to the public. Perez, living in diaspora and looking at his original home from afar, wants to show the reader the reality of the colonized Guam through poetry. “I started writing poetry after my family migrated from our home(is)land of Guahan (Guam) to the state of California. Poetry became a way for me to stay connected – to remember where I come from.” This connectedness to the land is clearly represented in his poetry. Perez criticizes the US Army that occupies increasingly larger areas of the island of Guam and mistreats the Natives on their own land. His poems can be read as activist texts because they reveal important information about the life circumstances of the author’s community and respond to, as well as critique, colonial and post-colonial conditions of the Pacific and Guam. This study looks at everyday objects mentioned in Perez’s poetry and seeks to unfold their “mission.” “Everyday objects” do not only refer to traditional objects of the Chamorro culture, but also, they can be examples of modern objects (borrowed from western culture) that relate to the everyday life of the Indigenous people of Guam. The research analyzes poetry from the poet’s ongoing multi-book series titled *from unincorporated territory*, which currently stands at four books; [*hacha*], [*saina*], [*guma’*] and [*lukao*].

## **BACKGROUND**

### **The Power of the Colonized Guam**

Ferdinand Magellan was the first European to reach Guam in 1521 and the following three and a half centuries Guam was under Spanish colonization. In 1898, after signing the Treaty of Paris as the end of the Spanish-American War, Guam was transferred to the United States and remained under the US Army’s control until 1941 when the Japanese army occupied and renamed it to Omiya-Jima (Holy Shrine Island). After three years of occupation by the Japanese army, the US Armed Forces “liberated” Guam on July 21st of 1944. Guam’s special status; “unincorporated territory,” was given in 1950, when US President Harry Truman signed the Organic Act. It stated that Guam could stay a self-governing country, but in the same time it would be dependent on the absolute power of the US Congress, as well as the US armed forces would continue to exercise extensive control (Woodward, 2013, p. 69-70). With the Organic Act, a civilian government was established, however citizens of Guam are under the control of the Department of Interior and thus, they are not given the full rights of US citizenship (Heim, 2018, p. 134). The Office of Insular Affairs defines an unincorporated territory as a “United States insular area in which the United States Congress has determined that only selected parts of the United States Constitution apply” (qtd. in Lai, 2011, p. 4). On the contrary, the “incorporated” states are all parts of the United States and enjoy the benefits of the US Constitution (p. 4). Many criticize the status of being “unincorporated,” since, in it, Guam is caught in an enforced colonial bond (Na’puti & Bevacqua, 2015, p. 840). In an infamous interview, Lieutenant Colonel Douglas from the US Air Force said; “People on Guam seem to forget that they are a possession, and not an equal partner.” Furthermore, he added, directly addressing the people of Guam: “you belong to me and I can do with you as best I please” (Lieutenant Colonel Douglas qtd. in Na’puti & Bevacqua, 2015, p. 839-840).

Hillary Clinton called the twenty-first century “America’s Pacific Century” (Clinton qtd. in Perez, 2015b, p. 621) as the Pacific region is strategically crucial for the US military. The US brought considerable changes to the Pacific and Guam since World War II. Guam is home to a large US military base that occupies one-third of the island today (Heim, 2018, p. 135). Along with the US military came the

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