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How (not) to Globalize Oceania: Ecology and Politics in Contemporary Pacific Island Performance Arts



Answering the call for a new ecological democracy, representational and performative initiatives by Oceanian writers and spoken-word artists, dancers, choreographers, and filmmakers render the conditions of life in the contemporary Pacific visible globally and counter the threat of disappearance posed by both global warming and a global economy. Acting in concert and insisting on the indivisibility of people and the land, their performative actions exemplify an “ecology of practices.”

The theme “Unsettling Oceania” brings to mind the forced relocations and the destruction of island homes imposed on Pacific Island societies in the name of advancing global modernity. But to isolate the predicament of small island nations threatened by global warming would be misleading. As Heather Lazrus points out, “Climate refugees and sinking islands have become popular tropes in climate discourse”; yet, “[w]hile highlighting the plights of islanders, such metaphors do more harm by removing agency from these people” (294). In order to properly engage the challenge posed to island societies by climate change, we must see it in connection, and in continuity, with earlier acts of violence committed on them by colonial powers in the name of universal peace and prosperity. After expanding on this context of acts of ecological violence and looking at future ecological prospects, I will discuss two examples of grassroots movements of ecological democracy that have successfully engaged global powers, highlighting the role that performance arts and literary creativity, especially poetry, played in their effective amplification. The first example comes from the American territory of Guåhan (Guam), where the concerted action of various community organizations, led by scholars and writers, successfully stalled plans by the US Department of Defense for a massive military build-up and saved an ancient Chamorro village and its natural environment from being converted into a live firing range. The second example stems from Fiji and shows ecological democracy unfolding in the form of an expanding movement of creative and performative actions responding to the impact of global warming on Pacific Island societies and environments, identified as a lasting effect of colonial violence.

Denial of Colonial Violence and Prospects for Rejuvenating Ecological Democracy

The threat of inundation, submergence and forced migration resulting from fossil fuel-driven global warming is but an escalation of other forms of destruction wrought on Pacific Islands throughout the twentieth century.¹ The devastation of the Micronesian island of Banaba, for instance, which was “essentially eaten away by [phosphate] mining” (Teaiwa, *Consuming* 5, 148) as twenty-two million tons of the land

1. This is not to say that other forms of colonial violence did not impact the Pacific Islands prior to the twentieth century. While at bottom always driven by economic opportunity and speculation, colonial ventures in the Pacific in the nineteenth century in particular aimed to bring native lands under foreign control and to transform indigenous cultural identities in ways compatible with capitalist and racist divisions of labour.

of this 6.5km² island were used to feed the agriculture of New Zealand and Australia, by 1945 already required the forced relocation of the Banabans to the island of Rabi in Fiji. The relatively slower violence of such excessive mining (from 1900 to 1980) in turn found an escalation in the instantaneous, prolonged, and longer lasting devastation of island worlds by the atomic bomb tests that the US, UK, and France carried out in multiple sites across Oceania: 325 detonations from 1946 to 1996, of which 173 were atmospheric explosions with a combined yield of 176.9 megatons (Ruff 780-1). The worst hit were the Marshall Islanders who endured sixty-seven test explosions, “the equivalent of 1.6 Hiroshima bombs each day over the twelve years of the tests (1946-58)” (794), resulting in long-term displacement and contamination, with the “US National Cancer Institute estimate[ing] in 2004 that about half the extra cancers that would occur as a result of fallout in the Marshall Islands were still to come” (797).

Rob Nixon’s concept of slow violence, referring to developmental interventions resulting in slowly enacted destruction and long-lasting harm, “whereby violence is decoupled from its original causes by the workings of time” (11), helps us see the continuity between such apparently disparate events as excessive mining, nuclear testing and the impacts of climate change, and to recognize the logic that sustains their occurrence. For those who have to live through them, these events form a series of calamities converging on the destruction of island homes, forced migration and lasting damage to physical and spiritual health. Yet those chiefly responsible for inflicting the harm may fail to see it or readily deny its seriousness in the name of some greater good. As Katerina Teaiwa reports in *Consuming Ocean Island*, for instance, in 1912 the *Sydney Morning Herald*, while noting the resistance of Banaban landowners to the alienation of their land for the extraction of phosphate, argued that it was “inconceivable that less than 500 Ocean Island-born natives can be allowed to prevent the mining and export of a produc[t] of such immense value to all the rest of mankind” (17). The Bikinians too, when they were asked to leave their island in 1946, were told “that the atomic tests were ‘for the good of mankind and to end all world wars’” (Firth 27; Ruff 793-4). Henry Kissinger’s notorious remark in 1969, regarding the Marshall Islanders who would have to make way for US military bases, “There are only 90,000 people out there. Who gives a damn?” (Hickel 208), stands out for its crudeness. Yet a similar lack of concern about the destruction and harm caused, in this case, by a fossil fuel-driven way of life was expressed by American physicist William Nierenberg, who as chairman of the Carbon Dioxide Assessment Committee in 1983 advised inaction regarding CO₂ emissions and painted a rosy picture of the likelihood of forced migration from areas rendered uninhabitable by climate change:

“Not only have people moved,” Nierenberg noted, “but they have taken with them their horses, dogs, children, technologies, crops, livestock, and hobbies. It is extraordinary how adaptable people can be.” (Oreskes and Conway 180-1)

The denial of harm expressed by such claims serves to veil another denial: the denial to the people directly affected of the peace and prosperity in the name of which environments and livelihoods are destroyed. Instead, as Rob Nixon notes with regard to the comparable situation of people displaced by megadam projects in India, so-called “Project-Affected People” are typically declared to be too few to count and become “virtual

uninhabitants,” as their lands are turned into submergence zones or sacrifice zones by advancing development (154).

The denial that characterized the development of western consumer democracy, as Timothy Mitchell has shown in his study of the shift from a coal to an oil economy in the twentieth century, has been built into the postcolonial world order and global economy as systemic inequality. As such, it now troubles the politics of the Anthropocene, in which the struggle for decolonization meets up with the fight to preserve liveable environments around the world. This is a challenge that “requires rejuvenating ecological democracy,” as Rob Nixon, quoting Vandana Shiva, emphasizes (172). Coming at a time when growing elites in formerly colonized countries are catching up and becoming accustomed to western-style modes, if not levels, of consumption, this call recognizes the historical truth that, as Amitav Ghosh puts it in *The Great Derangement*, “the universalist premise of industrial civilization was a hoax; that a consumerist mode of existence, if adopted by a sufficient number of people, would quickly become unsustainable and would lead, literally, to the devouring of the planet” (111-2). Referring to the “Anglosphere” (135), Ghosh points out the apparent paradox that the military and defence establishments of the countries where denial of climate change is politically most vociferous explicitly identify climate change as their top security priority (138-40). Yet the “politics of the armed lifeboat” (143), as he notes, is consistent with the strategies of empire that continue to underpin the global distribution of power:

[T]he climate crisis holds the potential of drastically reordering the global distribution of power as well as wealth. This is because the nature of the carbon economy is such that power, no less than wealth, is largely dependent on the consumption of fossil fuels. (142)

For Ghosh, therefore, “global inaction on climate change is by no means the result of confusion or denialism or a lack of planning: to the contrary, the maintenance of the status quo *is* the plan” (145).²

The unequivocal investment in securing the power and wealth supported by the carbon economy complicates the political response to denialism because it is accompanied by an erosion of democratic politics, to the point that it undermines a significant dissent from the status quo. As Ghosh himself acknowledges, the “Anglosphere” is also home to “some of the most vigorous environmental movements in the world” (136) and “American intelligence services [for instance] have already made the surveillance of environmentalists and climate activists a top priority” (140). From this point of view, the strategic objective seems to be to make denial inescapable in practice, regardless of individual convictions. As Timothy Clark points out in *Ecocriticism on the Edge*, therefore, in many cases,

“denial” is less the assumed property of a personality than of the encompassing condition in which it finds itself. Most modern infrastructure in the developed world is, so to speak,

2. Ghosh's claim is supported by research on the environmental impacts of militarization conducted by Andrew K. Jorgenson, Brett Clark and Jennifer E. Givens, which shows a strong correlation between carbon dioxide emissions per capita and military expenditures per soldier. Significantly, the military not only protects, but drives, fossil-fuel based economies by its own economic development. As Jorgenson *et al.* point out: “During regular operations, including peacetime activities, the armed forces consume large amounts of fossil fuels, adding to the accumulation of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere” (327). Referring to a study by Vaclav Smil, they note “that the three branches of the US military consumed approximately 25 million tons of fuel per year in the 1990s, excluding energy consumed in both the Gulf War and the bombing of Kosovo [...], ‘more than the total commercial energy consumption of nearly two thirds of the world's countries.’” (*ibid.*)

denial in concrete, for the distribution of buildings, work places, shopping areas and roads encourages or even enforces certain ways of life, such as private vehicle use, and makes (only temporary) sense in a period of cheap fossil fuel use. (159)

The effect is that almost any individual stance is compromised while attempts to organize action at a collective level are undermined, preventing the recognition of what Ghosh rightly points out is obvious: “that the scale of climate change is such that individual choices will make little difference unless certain collective decisions are taken and acted upon” (133). Clark identifies this as the effect of a pernicious form of “scale framing” (71-96), in which the insistence on individual choice serves to occlude the need, and the possibility, to organize action collectively, that is, politically, an observation that is consistent with Jacques Rancière’s “notion of postdemocracy,” in which the bureaucratization and commercialization of technologies of representation, through permanent surveillance and surveying, eliminate the possibility of an effective appearance of any dissenting public (*Disagreement* 101-3).

Ghosh’s conclusion, in view of this impasse, “that the formal political structures of our time are incapable of confronting this crisis on their own” (159), echoes calls to “rejuvenat[e] ecological democracy” (Nixon 172) and urges the question of how this could be effected. “The critical question remains the question of strategy,” Nixon writes in the epilogue of *Slow Violence* (277), and in the conclusion of *Carbon Democracy*, Mitchell notes that the transition from the era of cheap oil to that of tough oil, in which the profits of extraction come at ever greater social and environmental costs, calls “for a new kind of politics of nature to replace the old, in which the relationship of politics to nature was governed only by economic calculation” (252). Such calls resonate in the contemporary Pacific, where ongoing efforts of decolonization are accentuated by demands for environmental justice in the face of continuing militarization and worsening impacts of global warming.

Guåhan: Performance and Poetry in the Resistance against Military Expansion

The political and economic situation of Guåhan exemplifies Amitav Ghosh’s observation that the strategies of empire persist in the twenty-first century to secure the status quo of a fossil-fuel based global distribution of wealth and power as a legacy of colonialism. Formally established under Spanish control 350 years ago, the oldest colony in the Pacific has been an American possession since the Spanish-American war 120 years ago. As such, its political status and economic development continue to be determined by the military priorities of the United States and despite the establishment of a civilian government through the Organic Act of 1950, the people of Guåhan continue to be denied the full rights of US citizenship and self-determination under official administration by the Department of Interior. Protests and petitions against “the contradiction of American rule without American democracy” (Herman 636) can be dated back to 1901 and have been thwarted to this day, with a draft Commonwealth Act “providing for a greater measure of internal self-government [...] and the right of the Chamorro people to self-determination” (United Nations 17), endorsed by Guamanian voters in 1987, awaiting congressional action since negotiations with the federal government ended in 1997. In the meantime, the US Supreme Court’s assertion that “The Government

of Guam is in essence an instrumentality of the federal government” (Herman 637) continues to apply.³

Massive land appropriations by the US military after the Second World War, amounting to “nearly two thirds of the private property on Guam” (Camacho and Monnig 158), devastated the local economy and contributed to the imposition of a wasteful and unsustainable economic development with militarization and tourism as its two pillars. Today, “the U.S. military continues to occupy a third of the island” (*ibid.*) and to support an economy that keeps Guåhan dependent – with “nearly 90 percent of [its] food [being] imported” (Natividad and Kirk) as well as all of its energy derived from “petroleum products that are shipped in by tanker” (US Energy Information Agency) – and a quarter of its population of approximately 167,000 people living in poverty.⁴ As Keith Camacho and Laurel Monnig note:

The weak economy due to the security closure compounded the alienation of family lands. This loss of land combined with intense in-migration altered Chamorro traditional forms of agricultural development and sustainability, casting them into only a few realistic options for work, namely military service or civil government work. (158)

This situation has resulted in “disproportionately high numbers of Chamorro enlistees” in the US military:

Chamorros, both men and women, enlist in greater numbers than any other American ethnic group in the United States or its territories. And Chamorro casualty rates have been considerably higher in every U.S. war since the Korean War, including the most recent war in Iraq. (Camacho and Monnig 162-3)

What Michael Lujan Bevacqua has called Guåhan’s “banal coloniality” (33), its seemingly unalterable subordination to US military priorities, has thus entrenched a political order based on precarity, as Judith Butler has defined it:

Precarity designates that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death. Such populations are at heightened risk of disease, poverty, starvation, displacement, and of exposure to violence without protection. Precarity also characterizes that politically induced condition of maximized precariousness for populations exposed to arbitrary state violence who often have no other option than to appeal to the very state from which they need protection. (*Frames* 25-6)

As such, the political situation of Guåhan also calls for “a consideration of precarity as an existing and promising site for coalitional exchange” (28) and “the basis for an alliance focused on opposition to state violence and its capacity to produce, exploit, and distribute precarity for the purposes of profit and territorial defense” (32). Indeed, the recent activist and popular resistance to a massive military build-up on Guåhan has demonstrated the potential of such a coalitional politics, arising from conditions of precarity. The movement to preserve and protect Pãgat, organizing itself in opposi-

3. For a summary of Guamanian efforts toward self-determination dating back to 1901 and their denial, see Herman 634-7.

4. According to Natividad and Kirk, “[p]overty rates on Guam are high, with 25% of the population defined as poor. Between 38% and 41% of the island’s population qualifies for Food Stamps. Wage rates are low; schools are underfunded; and there are few opportunities for technical training on the island.” Although the island has a large potential for renewable energy, almost all of its energy continues to be derived from fossil fuels, with about 40% being used as jet fuel, 30% in unleaded gasoline, and 20% in diesel oil to generate electricity, “the military [with some 12,000 personnel] account[ing] for more than one-fifth of Guam’s energy consumption” (US Energy Information Agency).

tion to the frame of military domination at the moment of its reproduction, which, as Butler notes, must also be its momentary “self-breaking,” successfully exposed “both the frame’s efficacy and its vulnerability to reversal, to subversion, even to critical instrumentalization” (10). In doing so, the movement offered an example of the kind of performative politics that Butler has more recently discussed in *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, enacting a form of democracy where a “space of appearance” in Hannah Arendt’s sense (199), as a condition of political action, remains elusive or denied. Importantly, the movement thus demonstrated the role of performance arts and literary creativity in the constitution of such forms of democracy, unsettling what Jacques Rancière has called the “distribution [or partition] of the sensible” (*Dissensus* 36), the order of representation that determines and breaks down what counts, as what, and how much.

In 2006 the US and Japan agreed on a plan to move as many as 8,000 US marines and their families from Okinawa to Guam, in response to opposition to the military base there. This Realignment Roadmap entailed a massive build-up of military installations on Guam, involving a huge increase in both military and civilian population, as detailed in the Environmental Impact Statement issued by the US Navy in July 2010:

The total military population on Guam would increase by 30,190 (including 9,182 permanent military personnel, 9,950 dependents, 9,220 transient military personnel, and 1,836 civilian workers). In addition, construction workers and others could mean a total increase in population of about 79,000 at the peak in 2014. (Kan 12)⁵

The plan also involved the conversion of the ancient Chamorro village of Pāgat and its environment into a live firing range. The implementation of this plan met with strong local opposition, mobilized through various community organizations. Led by scholars and writers, the resistance to the build-up turned into a sustained movement, distinguished by its tactical resourcefulness and its creative use of diverse means and forms of representation. This allowed the movement to give rise to a politically empowered public and a network of support that instilled confidence in the capability of Chamorro values to prevail in the face of seemingly unstoppable militarization.

The movement’s tactics unfolded as a series of responses to the procedure of the US Department of Defense (DoD), which exposed and undermined the department’s strategy of giving the implementation of the build-up an appearance of democratic approval. When the DoD sought to demonstrate broad consensus on the build-up in November 2009 by giving the public a mere three months to review and comment on the 11,000-page Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) detailing the plans, volunteers from We Are Guåhan coordinated the reading of the document in sections and organized public meetings to solicit people’s views and comments, gathering over ten thousand comments that were submitted to the DoD (Leon-Guerrero; We Are Guåhan) and later published as a separate volume of the final EIS in July 2010. When a representative of the DoD then visited Pāgat to inspect the site of the proposed firing range, he was met by hundreds of protesters, urging the preservation of the village and the protection of its environment, while also expressing opposition to the military occupation and calling for the decolonization of Guåhan. When the DoD subsequently

5. For a detailed account of the unfolding and modifications of the plan from 2006 to 2014, see Kan. The local resistance to the military build-up is discussed in detail by Na’puti and Bevacqua and by Nogues.

nevertheless affirmed its plans, “a coalition of Guåhan groups [in November 2010] filed a lawsuit argu[ing] that the US military violated federal historical preservation and environmental laws when selecting Pāgat as the location for a new live firing range” (Na’puti and Bevacqua 850). Concurrently, a series of Heritage Hikes were organized, featuring talks that focused on the history of the military’s claims and control of land and its impact on Chamorro community and culture. Eventually, in 2013 the DoD selected an alternative site for the firing range and by 2014, the department announced a scaled back version of the planned build-up, to be implemented over a longer period of time with a correspondingly lower impact on the local population and the environment (Kan 13).

Two things stand out in these concerted efforts to resist the US military’s plans to take more land and intensify its use of an island of which it already occupies more than one third. One is the mobilization and enactment of Chamorro values, emphasizing affirmation rather than opposition. A video of the rally to “Save Pāgat,” uploaded to YouTube, shows a predominance of signs calling for the protection of the old village and its natural environment and t-shirts printed for the occasion use the slogan “preserve and protect Pāgat Village,” echoing the Chamorro “Pledge,” the *inifresi*, which promises “to protect and defend the beliefs, culture, language, air, water, and the land of the Chamoru” (Na’puti and Bevacqua 849). This affirmation of Chamorro values was further underlined by the participation of the dance group Taotao Tano’, performing Chamorro songs and dances and lending the protest a celebratory mood. In a similar vein, the lawsuit focused on the obligation to preserve and protect a place that “has been registered as an archaeological site in the Guam National Register of Historic Places” since 1974 (Na’puti and Bevacqua 846) and the Heritage Hikes, according to Tiara Na’puti and Michael Bevacqua, “offered a way to take value in ‘our history, and our culture, and our land’ by helping ‘educate ourselves on our true history’” (852). The mobilization of Chamorro values thus also involved an activation of cultural memory, as Na’puti and Bevacqua suggest, “position[ing] movement actions within the broader cultural framework of inafa’ maolek” (847), a principle that literally translates as “to make things good for each other” (*ibid.*) and emphasizes the importance of reciprocity and interdependence.

The other outstanding aspect of this event is the linking of diverse performative appearances of people at and across different stages into a powerful public space. By themselves, any of these actions might have proved ineffectual. Even ten thousand individual comments on the DEIS are readily absorbed by what Rancière calls “a structure of the visible” (*Disagreement* 103), the substitution of an uninterrupted polling and tracking of “public opinion” for the collective appearance of people as political subjects, which effectively rules out dissent. This was evident in the DoD’s publication of the comments in volume ten of the final EIS, where they were itemized and numbered on 4,556 pages and each comment was addressed individually by a standardized reply (US Department of the Navy). The many individual actions became politically effective only by being gathered, repeatedly, into an emergent public space, in which people, as dissenting subjects, could continue to voice and manifest their opposition to the way the military framed their lives. This was not so much a question of strategy as a matter of acting in concert between diverse groups and individuals, both on Guåhan and off-island, in different forums and media, creating an assemblage of practices that also

revealed a network of support capable of transforming a condition of isolation and vulnerability into one of interdependence and confidence.

Chamorro writer Craig Santos Perez has participated in this political movement and through his poetry extended and given visual shape to the public space that it sustains. Already in the first instalment of his open-ended long poem *from unincorporated territory*, published in 2008 and entitled *bacha*, he announced his hope

that these poems provide a strategic position for “Guam” to emerge from imperial “reducción(s)” into further uprisings of meaning. Moreover, I hope “Guam” (the word itself) becomes a strategic site for my own voice (and other voices) to resist the reductive tendencies of what Whitman called the “deformed democracy” of America. (11)

In an excerpt from the sequence “Lisiensan Ga’lago,” Perez figuratively evokes the impact of the relocation of 8,000 marines to Guåhan and aligns his poetry with the resistance to the build-up:

from LISIENSAN GA’LAGO

ocean	hanom	light
tano	bread	niyok
breath	attadok	peace

8000?*

please visit:

<http://www.petitiononline.com/haleta/petition.html>

<http://decolonizeguam.blogspot.com>

<http://jgpo-guam-cmtf.blogspot.com/>

(83)

Similarly, in the second volume of *from unincorporated territory*, entitled *saina*, he reproduced his testimony before the UN Special Political and Decolonization Committee in 2008, as part of the sequence “*from tidelands*,” with the text printed under erasure, suggesting obliteration as well as sedimentation into collective memory.

Perez’s poetry is a metaphorical practice of composition, dedicated to nurturing a decolonial future in the present by continually drawing on and extending the past from which it stems.⁶ The two concerns that have characterized the movement resisting the military build-up on Guåhan are also at work in this experimental poetry: an orientation on Chamorro values, such as *inafa’ maolek*, that calls for active remembrance, and

6. For a detailed analysis of Perez’s metaphorical poetic practice and its political significance, see my “Locating Guam: The Cartography of the Pacific and Craig Santos Perez’s Remapping of Unincorporated Territory.”

a transformative recollection, continuously renewing the web of relations from which voices, words and images keep appearing in *from unincorporated territory*. Perez dedicates the third installment of his long poem, entitled *guma*’, “to the group *We Are Guåhan* and to all those at home and in the diaspora who spoke out against the military buildup” (91) and offers the book to the reader as *chenchule*’ (92), a gift inviting reciprocation. In a sequence of *guma*’, entitled “*ginen ta(la)ya*,” he recalls the story of the resistance to the build-up (35, 60, 75) and links it with the memory of his grandfather’s war-time experiences under Japanese occupation and his later work for the National Park Service War Memorial, where his “job was to preserve things that [he] wasn’t willing to build in the first place” (74). Also included in this sequence are Perez’s own memories of being approached by army recruiters as a teenager in California and lists of Micronesian soldiers killed in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, taken from the website of the Office of Insular Affairs, with all but their names put under erasure. In another sequence of *guma*’, entitled “*ginen fatal impact statements*,” Perez assembles selected comments from the Final Environmental Impact Statement on the build-up, which he had posted on his Facebook page, inviting further comments, as he explains:

- I read Volume Ten of the Final Environmental Impact Statement, which contains nearly all the 10,000 comments that people submitted in response to the DEIS during the official 90-day comment period
- I copy and paste phrases, sentences, words, passages from the comments of the people
- I post these comments as my Facebook status
- Sometimes others comment on the comment
- Sometimes I (45)

Extending the comment period via Facebook into the writing and reading of his poem, Perez creates what Collier Noguez calls a “gathering space” that bridges the boundary between online and offline worlds, virtual and physical places, “becoming a space that gathers far-flung stakeholders who already consider themselves part of an effective real-world political community, and that also gathers new potential stakeholders, inviting them to join that offline community” (28).

Throughout Perez’s work, the struggle of remembrance – of fighting forgetfulness and facing the responsibility to remember what one would rather not – is transformed into a living memory that continually assembles and recomposes fragments of history drawn from diverse archives, written and oral, official and personal, commercial and shared. Readers of *from unincorporated territory* must make connections within poems, between poems, and between poems and the discursive archives from which they are composed. This mental and material movement could be seen figuratively to perform the negotiation of boundaries that characterizes life in the postcolonial Pacific, exemplified by Guåhan, where alliances must be forged within kinship groups, across ethnic divisions, and between Guamanians at home and abroad as well as an interested public more generally. In *guma*’, this enactment of democratic politics is also given an explicitly ecological dimension, in a sequence entitled “*ginen the micronesian kingfisher [i siheke]*,” which tells the story of the native bird, who as a result of the introduction of predators like the brown tree snake has become extinct in Guåhan and only survives in zoos on the US mainland. Suggesting a kinship with the endangered species, Perez’s inclusion of the kingfisher in his remembrance evokes an analogy with the condition of Chamorro both on- and off-island, living on US terms:

—of trespass—[*i sihek*]

when land is
caged [we]

—of theft—[*i sihek*]

are caged within
[our] disappearance

(71)

Dedicated to an ecological democracy, Perez's metaphorical practice of composition cuts through the cage of the military frame and by inventively disturbing the partition of the sensible, persistently works to reopen and renew a world of thriving reappearance.

Fiji: Literary Creativity and Performance in the Advocacy for Global Climate Action

Perez's poetry, which he characterizes as "oceania compositions" (*saina* 63), arises from and responds to conditions of militarized precarity and works toward their political transformation. As such, it joins and amplifies what Judith Butler describes as a "politics of performativity," which "insists upon the interdependency of living creatures as well as the ethical and political obligations that follow from any policy that deprives, or seeks to deprive, a population of a livable life" (*Notes* 208). Such a politics at once enacts ecological values and makes manifest a web of relations that sustains a life in common. As Butler notes, "when [this] works, there is a performative enactment of radical democracy in such movements that alone can articulate what it might mean to lead a good life in the sense of a livable life" (218). In its inclusive sense, this corresponds to what Bruno Latour has identified as "the crucial political task" of an ecological democracy, which is "to *distribute* agency as far and in as *differentiated* a way as possible" (15). As Latour notes, this task distinguishes a new kind of cosmopolitics, one dedicated to the progressive composition of a common world (14). In her book, *Cosmopolitics*, Isabelle Stengers defines such a view of politics as an "ecology of practices" (79-80, 37), in distinction from the traditional, Kantian, cosmopolitan ideal of a perpetual peace resulting from a war-driven conversion to the spirit of free trade, which continues to drive imperialist strategies:

The "ecological" perspective invites us not to mistake a consensus situation, where the population of our practices finds itself subjected to criteria that transcend their diversity in the name of a shared intent, a superior good, for an ideal peace. Ecology doesn't provide any examples of such submission. (35)

A second example of an enactment of ecological democracy in the Pacific that effectively transforms precaritized conditions of life unfolds from Fiji and reveals an ecology of practices in the form of an expanding movement of creative and performative actions responding to the impact of global warming on Pacific Island societies and environments. The two concerns that have guided the movement resisting the military build-up in Guāhan have also guided these initiatives to mobilize creative and performance arts to address the threat posed by climate change. There was, first, an active reawakening of cultural values and attitudes attuned to the fragility of the oceanic environment, reviving a cultural memory that is potentially transformative. And second, this was then amplified by way of expanding and upscaling practices, from local initiatives

to productions that gain attention regionally and globally. As with the movement to protect Guāhan, this was not so much the implementation of a unified strategy as an effect of diverse groups acting in concert, ecologically, which gave rise to a network of support that turned a condition of vulnerability in isolation into confidence in interdependence. This movement could be described as an open-ended spiral, amplifying agency as it unfurls, and through which people and their island worlds keep appearing, or returning, in new ways with the past always firmly in front.

In a paper presented at the Oceanic Conference on Creativity and Climate Change held at the University of the South Pacific in 2010, Cresantia Frances Koya has emphasized the importance of art and culture in challenging and overcoming a mentality in the postcolonial Pacific that associates national independence with western-style development, an unsustainable and destructive path:

The outcome of this is societies that are constantly in transition trying to keep up with the rest of the world; societies of people struggling between the reality of small economies and fragile environments and their desire for the luxuries of the developed world, which are marketed as *easier, faster and better*. (52)

Koya describes a vibrant scene of artistic initiatives and projects that aim to change values and attitudes and to shape communities within a framework of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), in which

the arts are seen as a means by which to develop and re-awaken notions of living in balance within the wider context of a highly commercialised, “selfish” and “convenience first” lifestyle of the globalised user-pay society we live in and the economic and political power [...] structures that support this. (57, italics removed)

Among such initiatives Koya points out recent Pacific arts festivals such as the Kava Kuo Heka Festival in Tonga, the King Tide Festival in Tuvalu and the Wasawasa Festival in Fiji, which, under thematic titles like “Au Mei Moana (Returning Tide),” “Tuvalu E! The Tide is High,” and “Festival of the Oceans,” were dedicated to “advocacy and awareness” (58-59). Other projects Koya cites include art communities in various island nations and art initiatives, many of which were incubated and launched at the University of the South Pacific. These include a three-volume ESD anthology that “features academic work [...], story-telling, photography, visual arts, poetry, music and dance [as well as] an annotated bibliography on ESD works” (65-6) and youth leadership workshops, collaborative events and stage productions realized by the Oceania Centre for Arts, Culture and Pacific Studies.

It is in the context of this burgeoning creativity that the Oceania Centre’s ambitious stage production, *Moana: The Rising of the Sea*, took shape in 2013. A collaboration between the University of the South Pacific and the European Consortium for Pacific Studies (an EU-funded research project headed by Edvard Hviding of the University of Bergen), *Moana* dramatizes the threat of forced migration faced by Pacific Island societies in a multimedia spectacle combining dance, theatre, song and documentary film. The show, which features traditional dances from Samoa, Kiribati and Fiji, as well as original compositions and poetry, was written and directed by Vilsoni Hereniko with musical director Igelese Ete, choreography by Peter Rockford Espiritu, and memorably performed by Allan Alo as lead actor, the Oceania Dance Theatre, and the Pasifika Voices Ensemble. In a fictional story of a Pacific Island community who decide to build a voyaging canoe to take them to safety, it conveys the dangers and harm to lives and

homes inflicted by increasing storms and floods, expresses the pain at the loss of ancestral lands, and emphasizes the people's abiding bond with the land as the source of their identity, most explicitly in a speech by the chief Telematua addressing the United Nations. The show was first performed at the University of the South Pacific in 2013 and toured Europe in May and June 2015, including a performance at the EU Parliament in Brussels and one at the Bergen International Festival, which was recorded and has since been released online and on DVD under the title *Moana Rua: The Rising of the Sea*.

In a recent article, Diane Looser argues that *Moana* uses the voyaging canoe as "a powerful symbol of purposeful mobility and explorative agency in Oceania," although "the choice to depict migration as an adaptive strategy may appear surprising – even controversial – in light of the predominant attitude expressed by ambassadors for Pacific nations [preferring mitigation over migration]" (46-7):

Through the *vaka*, history and culture, tradition and innovation are enmeshed, foregrounding a metaphor for movement that puts heritage at the centre and is figured less as a deracination than as an extension, whereby the past is carried into the future rather than irretrievably lost. (48)

This interpretation is consistent with Vilsoni Hereniko's explanation, in the program notes, of the choice of the double-hulled canoe as the show's symbol of hope: "Maybe, like a double-hulled canoe, western science and indigenous knowledge will safely navigate us out of these dangerous waters?" (5)

The idea of empowering mobility, metaphorically associated with the canoe, is rendered metamorphic, or transformative, through its enactment in dance, a shape-changing appearance that celebrates survival and continuance. *Moana* shows this by staging the beauty of the choreographed movement against a background of documentary footage of island homes and landscapes battered by floods and storms. Mobilizing its dance theatre thus against calamity, the show at the same time acknowledges its place in a tradition that also recalls the "adaptation" of Banaban dance theatre in response to the people's forced relocation to Rabi in Fiji in 1945. *Moana's* narrative structure, articulated in a series of scenes presided over by a chief, has parallels with Banaban dance theatre in Rabi as analyzed by Wolfgang Kempf and Elfriede Hermann. And the show's incorporation of dances of different traditions alongside compositions in western musical fashions echoes the innovations of Banaban dance, which, according to Katerina Teaiwa, both affirms a continuity with "Kiribati dance beyond the shores of its thirty-three islands [...] as extensions of that land and emplaced identity" ("Choreographing" 75) and over time has innovatively incorporated "the popular Western twist, the Samoan taupati (a body percussion dance), the Tahitian tamure, and later, when the community had gained access to film and video, karate- and kung fu-inspired male styles" (82). Like these Banaban choreographic adaptations, the dance theatre of *Moana* uses the moving bodies as vehicles of cultural memory and continued reappearance through which the story of surviving is turned into a celebration of flourishing.

Moana in turn expanded this web of cultural connections further by also featuring a poem by Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner, entitled "Tell Them," which counters the invisibility of the Pacific Islands among global concerns by a kaleidoscopic portrait of the Marshall Islands appearing in myriad guises and shapes and which ends with a plea to

[...] tell them
we don't want to leave

we've never wanted to leave
and that we
are nothing
without our islands (66-7)

Like *Moana's* dance theatre, the meaning of Jetnil-Kijiner's poem is enriched by its remembrance of generations of Marshall Islanders who made similar pleas before, addressing the UN Trusteeship Council shortly after the Bravo test in 1954, for instance:

[L]and means a great deal to the Marshallese. It means more than just a place where you can plant your food crops and build your houses or a place where you can bury your dead. It is the very life of the people. Take away their land and their spirits go also. (Ruff 796)

Or, in 1972, resisting US plans to bomb the islands again as part of their Pacific Cratering Experiments (PACE): "You live with gold and money and we have to depend on land and whatever life we can find on land and in the water. Without these we are nothing" (Firth 35).

Moana honored this active remembrance by closing its European tour in 2015 with another poem by Jetnil-Kijiner, "Dear Matafele Peinam," made famous by the poet's performance at the UN Climate Summit in New York in September 2014. Addressing the poet's daughter, "Dear Matafele Peinam" mirrors "Tell Them" as a declaration of confidence, beginning by acknowledging the threat of rising waters and disappearance as what "they say":

They say you, your daughter
and your granddaughter, too
will wander
rootless
with only
a passport
to call home (70)

But she goes on to promise the child that she will not lose her home: "Because baby we are going to fight / your mommy daddy / bubu jimma your country and your president too / we will fight" (71). And then the poem launches into a chant that brings the people, islanders and their allies, back into view line by line, until

[...] there are thousands
out on the street
marching with signs
hand in hand
chanting for change NOW (72)

As this emphasis shows, there is an explicit kinship between Oceanian movements to protect and defend their island world and grassroots social movements elsewhere in the world, which seek to realize what Isabell Lorey calls "presentist democracy" (59), meaning that they question both a teleological orientation toward a hoped-for future and the representational frameworks of institutionalized politics. When they work, such movements effectively unsettle the dominant "distribution of the sensible" (Rancière, *Dissensus* 36) and blur the lines separating activist and official politics. In so doing, they demonstrate a capacity to transform (global) democracy by enabling enactments of ecologically based values and practices to gain political agency and recognition. This could be witnessed in Paris in December 2015, where Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner led a group

of Pacific Islander spoken-word poets sponsored by the Global Call for Climate Action to perform at the United Nations conference on climate change (Goodman). It could be witnessed too in Guåhan in December 2016, when the activists who successfully opposed the destruction of Págat and the implementation of the Realignment Roadmap organized a series of events under the title “Lina‘la, i Hanom (water is life),” in solidarity with the water protectors at Standing Rock opposing the Dakota Access pipeline. Including a prayer ceremony and music and art performances, the demonstration highlighted the connection of the water protectors’ cause to the protection of ancestral Chamorro land and water in Guåhan (Herrera). And the unsettling of the separation of grassroots and official politics could also be witnessed during Fiji’s presidency of the Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP23) in 2017-2018, which not only saw a push for more ambitious international climate action and increased funding for adaptation and resilience building, but also the launch of the Talanoa Dialogues, democratic forums inspired by Pacific concepts of decision making through storytelling that are inclusive, participatory and respectful (Talanoa Dialogue). All of these initiatives and activities enact democratic politics in the form of an ecology of practices, globally acting in concert with others without submitting to a single rule, based on indigenous Pacific values and practices.⁷

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