EPISTEMOLOGIES OF CARE: AN ECOPOETIC CONVERSATION BETWEEN CRAIG SANTOS PEREZ, JAMAICA H. OSORIO AND SIA FIGIEL

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ABSTRACT

Bearing in mind Epeli Hau'ofa's concept of "a sea of islands," this article proposes an ecocritical analysis of three poems written by three Indigenous authors, Craig Santos Perez (CHamorro-Guam) Jamaica H. Osorio (Hawai'i), and Sia Figiel (Samoa) published between 2016 and 2022, respectively. Together, the poems create a relevant example of Indigenous ecocriticism that is overtly interacting with global flows of power and are simultaneously entangled with the struggles of many other Pacific islanders when it comes to topics such as ecological degradation, land occupation, mass tourism, and militarization/nuclearization of Pacific island-nations. The poems to be analyzed are "Green Washing and White Dollar Policy" (Jamaica H. Osorio), "Praise Song for Oceania" (Craig Santos Perez) and "In-Land-Ness" (Sia Figiel). The epistemologies of care that I am referring to are based on Indigenous ancestral knowledge and practices that are vessels of environmental ethics and honor Earth as an ancestor, as well as demonstrations of multiple forms of belonging in which human and non-human elements are symbiotically connected. Therefore, this article problematizes and critically questions the impact of global policies upon Indigenous communities as well as it presents examples of resistance that are generating transcultural movements in which contemporary Indigenous writers question the validity of globalized policies that had proven to be disruptive and harmful for their societies. Each of these authors presents challenging questions that trace environmental degradation back to the colonial encounter while demonstrating that their Indigenous societies developed complex and sustainable relationships with the environment, those that were disrupted by colonialism and subsequently imperialism and globalization. Moreover, the voices of these writers resonate through waves of anger against the harm that has been inflicted upon ecosystems, and thus their poems are ways of denouncing injustices, and, to a certain extent, ensuring cultural survival when assuming a strategic significance as counternarratives to the Americanization of the islands. Consequently, my analysis of the poems aims at demonstrating that coalitions formed among Pacific Islanders vividly respond to the imperial West and fiercely resist land occupation and environmental degradation. Embedded in my analysis is also an assumed critique to colonial/Western views of nature as a separate and empty object that exists to be exploited and to generate profit. In sum, the tapestry woven by the poems selected here highlights the importance of activism, education, care, and love as actions that simultaneously denounce multiple forms of "slow violence" against Indigenous cultures and generate decolonial discourses.

Keywords: Indigenous poetry; decolonial love; ethics of care; ecopoetic; activism.

"We are the sea, we are the ocean, we must wake up to this ancient truth and together use it to overturn all hegemonic views that aim ultimately to confine us again… in the tiny spaces that we have resisted accepting as our sole appointed places, and from which we have recently liberated ourselves" —Epeli Haua'ofa, "Our Sea of Islands"

"We are not drowning, we are fighting" —Pacific Climate Warriors

INTRODUCTION

If one looks at the astonishing images of Planet Earth taken from outer space, one is immediately confronted with the geographic vastness of the Pacific Ocean, which covers a considerable part of the planet's surface. Inevitably, in the face of such vastness, there is also a certain sense of cosmic loneliness engulfed by waves, tides, and the fluidity that is always entangled with water imagery. Considered the largest geographical feature on Planet Earth, the Pacific Ocean occupies one-third of the planet's surface. There is also in that vastness a "sea of islands" that have prompted the imagination of many people for centuries. The Pacific continent is composed of more than 20.000 islands which is nearly 80 percent of the world's total. Moreover, it is also commonly described as "the water continent" due to this characteristic. Focusing on the dimension of the geographic area, Rod Edmond (1997) describes the Pacific as follows:

> The most banal yet awesome fact about the Pacific is its size. This vast ocean with its scattered pinprick islands has raised questions of scale, proportion and relation whenever it has been contemplated. From an outside perspective the islands of Oceania are almost submerged in the immensity of their surroundings (indeed Pacific islands have come and gone), their sea-locked inhabitants marooned on coral or volcanic tips of land. (1)

It was, nonetheless, this particular feature of dimension that seems to have compelled European nations both to fight over its control and divide it, when the Pacific became a 'white possession.' For centuries, it was called by Europeans the "South Sea" reaching from "the Arctic to the Antarctic, and [it] straddles the 180th meridian, or what has come to be seen as the eastern and western hemispheres" (Armitage & Bashford 2014, 5).

Spread across one-third of the planet Earth, this "water continent" encompasses one of the most heterogeneous cultural groups in the world, with a remarkable number of native languages that were displaced. They did not completely disappear, but they were, indeed, displaced in institutional spaces such as schools, where they lost their visibility and were substituted by English, French, or Spanish (Trask 1999; Keown 2013). In response to the vicissitudes brought by several global politico-economic alliances, the geographic and conceptual limits of the Pacific have shifted at different historical moments, and, with the increasing of European and American voyaging from 1760

onwards, there were significant alterations of the Pacific region as a geographical and social space. Following the Tongan scholar Epeli Hau'ofa (2000), it remains fundamental to focus on the forgotten people of history, and how they have resisted and held together by realigning their positionality within a global panorama that has been marginalizing their voices.

This confinement inflicted upon islands-nation from the Pacific has been serving to justify and legitimate multiple forms of violence against Indigenous peoples, lands, and ecosystems. Consequently, violence against the environment or eco-violence can be assumed as "slow violence" (Rob Nixon 2011), which is the violence that "occurs gradually out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (2). Although it is no longer possible to assume that environmental degradation occurs at a slow pace given the state of some islands in the Pacific that run the risk of disappearing within the next decade—Kiribati being one of the most elucidating examples of that—what is at stake in Nixon's analysis is the fact that most natural catastrophes occur out of the geographic domains of Western nations, and by being so it largely contributes to ongoing forms of exploitation. Moreover, climate change is prone to accentuate profound socioenvironmental inequalities as those who are poor and vulnerable are likely to become even more. That said, a thorough critique of capitalism as presented in Jamaica H. Osorio goes hand in hand with a critical analysis of its relationship with climate change as it has been saturated with divisions based on race, class, and gender.

Planet Earth is changing if one considers the escalating desertification of Africa, the disappearance of seashores caused by the sea level rise in places such as Southeast Asia, and in the island nations of the Pacific and Indian Oceans, the disintegration of Greenland and Antarctica to the escalation in frequency and intensity of weather events in many other parts of the world, climate change clearly has an impact on people, plants, and animals. The ever-increasing awareness of climate change is catalyzing the interconnectedness of dialogues across the globe and, by extension, multiple forms to address the dynamism of our planet flourish in order to contribute to raising awareness to those questions. Ultimately, it seems crucial to acknowledge that human beings are not

alone, we are always in relation with humans and non-humans, always ecological. As a matter of fact, these relations should be perceived in terms of interdependency (Haraway 2008) that aims to foster an ethics of care. The conceptual frame of ethics of care that I am referring to is informed by ecocriticism and animal studies, as it implies inclusiveness (Haraway 2008; Gruen 2015)—the interaction rather than the juxtaposition of human and animals—and it also values the multiplicity of ways that tend to organize human moral experiences based on compassion. Elizabeth DeLoughrey (2019) defines the ethics of care as "constitutive to our being of (and on) earth/Earth, and to our embodied relation to our futures, human and otherwise" (196). Accordingly, it is this ethics of care that characterizes Polynesian cosmologies and whose features become legible in the poems. Therefore, the possibility for decolonial practices to be enacted resides in the epistemological assumption of love for the land and the ocean within which people are inseparable from their ecosystems, and this assumption informs their struggles based upon this ethic of care. In sum, those decolonial practices are, to a certain extent, the materialization of love as a praxis rather than a mere feeling (Sandoval 2000).

It is, thus, my argument that together the poems I selected for this article create a relevant example of Indigenous ecocriticism that is overtly interacting with global flows of power. Consequently, through poetry the authors selected in this article prove to be simultaneously entangled with the struggles of many other Pacific islanders when it comes to topics such as ecological degradation, land occupation, mass tourism, and militarization/nuclearization of Pacific island-nations creating a sort of "Oceanic imaginary" (Subramani 2001). Through this Oceanic imaginary, the authors concurrently chart the links between colonial experience and emancipatory principles and elaborate an extended critique to oppressive socio-cultural systems involving Indigenous knowledge, cosmologies, languages, and genealogies. The ecopoetic dialogue that I am referring to when analyzing the poems seeks out an integrated perspective through which human and more-than-beings interact from a point of biocentric relationality. It also focuses on how Indigenous knowledge is interrelated with territory, kinship, identity, governance, economy, and education. Accordingly, culture and artistic creation are forms of political resistance used to fight back the erosion of Native peoples' heritage or

even the attack on what Haunani-Kay Trask (1999b), the Native Hawaiian writer and activist, has defined as "people's self-respect through a colonization of the mind" (19). Indeed, culture and art are political, "writing, music, painting, dance, and voyaging are profoundly political, just as land ownership, medical care, universities, hazard-waste sitting, and cultural hegemony are political" (Trask 1999b, 18). It is this decolonial aspect that seems to inform the poems analyzed here.

Bearing in mind the importance of deconstructing anthropocentric discourses, bell hooks (1998) asserts that "Western conceptions of humans and of cultural life are founded on beliefs that the human is somehow separate from and superior to nature" (150). Thus, it is precisely this axial aspect that has also served colonialism and has been serving globalization, and the one that is fundamental in Indigenous struggles against cultural and land dispossession. Most Pacific Indigenous cultures developed profound connections to land and oceans as evidenced in oral traditions that demonstrate genealogical links between Indigenous peoples and their ecosystems. A symbiotic relation that can be translated in terms of an ethics of care (DeLoughrey 2019). Uninterested in Indigenous cosmologies and ways of knowing, imperial and global ideologies were implemented by Western nations and Indigenous peoples were often coerced to accept them. Forms of coercion and persuasion often occur in ways that are complicated to dismantle as is the example of economic growth, for example, in Hawai'i motivated by tourism (Kelly 2014). Yet, Indigenous groups have been permanently fighting against imperialism still promoted through globalization and capitalism, and part of their resistance resides in the importance given to ancestral knowledge, and to the politics of everyday life.

Following, Chela Sandoval's (2000) discussion on the possibility of love as a decolonial practice and a "differential consciousness," asserting that "the language of lovers can puncture through the everyday narratives that tie us to the social time and space, to the descriptions, recitals, and plots that dull and order our senses insofar as such social narratives are tied to the law" (139-40), it can be argued that the ecocritical dialogue established between the authors selected here revolves around a profound love towards their Indigenous cultures. The sort of discourse that allows the possibility of

connections between people and communities, and one that forwards the recognition of the failure of Western discourses, of the entire matrix of Western modernity that sustains its power based on the coloniality of being.

GREEN WASHING AND WHITE DOLLAR POLICY

Published in 2018 in *Effigies III*, an anthology of Pacific Indigenous poetry, the poem "Green Washing and White Dollar Policy" by Native Hawaiian author Jamaica Heolimeleikalani Osorio is part of a collection of poems that traces back the history of Hawaiian occupation and its militarization. The anthology presents an array of Indigenous authors whose poems have woven a vibrant tapestry of impressions about culture, the environment, politics, feminism and history overall. Its importance is unquestionable as it simultaneously offers a counternarrative to mainstream ideologies of power, brutal occupation and militarization of island-nations, the erosion of Indigenous languages. Hence, it constructs a reparative discourse that aims at shedding light into the darkness caused by enforced colonial practices, praising ancestral memory, oral traditions and demonstrating a profound love towards land, oceans, and all beings.

In Native Hawaiian culture *aloha ʻāina* (love for the land) represents one of the fundamental aspects of Native Hawaiian identity, and it has been at the core of those discourses against land occupation, militarization, and mass tourism that have largely contributed to contest the impoverishment and marginalization of Native Hawaiians. There is a decolonial rhetoric in the Hawaiian concept visible in the symbiotic relation between human and nonhuman elements. It is this counter-discourse that animates the poem produced by Jamaica H. Osorio, as the author clearly alludes to the importance of protecting the islands from the excessive use of natural resources and describes processes of identity formation based on those connections between the land and Native Hawaiian people. This is important to observe because the concept of love for the land may also be extended to the way Perez and Figiel portray their cultures respectively. To this end, these authors contribute to an ethics of care (DeLoughrey 2019) that is constitutive to the embodied relation between Indigenous peoples and their lands.

"Green Washing and White Dollar Policy" surges as a manifesto whose words are full of both rage and compassion. The poem covers a multiplicity of themes spanning from the colonial encounter to climate change and its inevitable intersectionality between race, gender, and geography. It is this intersectionality that reinforces the nature of violence perpetrated against Indigenous communities across the globe. The poem itself starts with the reference to historical events chronologically described—the Hawaiian occupation and two major earthquakes in Chile, in 1960 and 2010 respectively—as constitutive events of the same major catastrophes, colonialism and climate change, that have been destroying the planet—while part of the world crumbles, the other half watches it happening, blaming "poor infrastructure and tectonic plate anger" (Osorio 2018, 65). However, to argue that half of the world passively watches the catastrophes does not belie the uneven impact that Western global aspirations and policies have exerted over socioenvironmental landscapes in international contexts (Nixon 2011). Therefore, the accelerated destruction of the Planet Earth caused by mass consumption and extractivism intensified, fomented violence and solidified structural inequities, exactly as all that together increases greed and "Leaves brown children / Swept under a growing pilar called poverty" (Osorio 2018, 65).

As the poem unfolds, Osorio unpacks the nature of ecological racism by using the expressions "brown bodies" and "brown spaces" to refer to Indigenous people and their lands, those who are forgotten by multi-billionaire corporations whose occupation and destruction of Indigenous lands have been largely contributing to poverty and depletion of natural resources. While capturing the energy of natural disasters, the author transforms it to highlight the darkest angles of structural violence, particularly with regard to Native Hawaiians, and creates webs of connections that escape geopolitical frameworks. By constantly using the expression "brown bodies," the author is utterly exposing the racial dimension of violence that intersects with other forms of marginalization, such as economic violence and social discrimination. The verses, "To the deep sea mining off the coast of Fiji/ to Puna's scorched spine/ and Chile's cracked lips/ Hawai'i's biocultural prostitution/ And Guam's military base hips" (Osorio 2018, 69) are illustrative of how Oceania became a playground for developed industrialized and

militarized nations to enact their power. It may be accurate to point out that the previous verses are profoundly feminized which overly alludes to the way Indigenous women have been marginalized due to colonial practices.

Moreover, it is possible to assert that the colonialism practiced in Hawai'i is economic, and cultural violence occurs both via militarism and mass consumption of natural resources (Trask 2004). Accordingly, violence has indeed color, which means that "the color of violence, then, is the color of white over black, white over brown, white over red, white over yellow. It is the violence of north over south, of continents over archipelagos, of settlers over natives and selves. Shaping this color scheme are the labyrinths of class and gender, of geography and industry, of metropoles and peripheries, of sexual definitions and confinements" (Trask 2004, 9). The color of violence that Trask describes is the one that has been pervasive in Hawai'i but also the one affecting other Indigenous peoples across the globe, and the one that Osorio addresses when constantly referring to "brown bodies" and "brown places." Osorio's poem then acknowledges and gives visibility to those "brown bodies" that are often erased by unseen forms of slow violence, namely land occupation, extractivism, and over-consumption of natural resources. Her voice speaks of solidarity, a transnational solidarity that, to a certain extent, aims at achieving justice and ethical accountability. In doing so, and based on Osorio's personal background, it is possible to establish a bridge between her interventive voice and the magnetic force of the Native Hawaiian concepts of *aloha 'āina* and *malāna 'āina,* to care for the land, whose connection is mainly centered on the symbiotic relation between humans and non-human elements.

Osorio's ecocritical approach is, thus, rooted in Native Hawaiian epistemology and the symbiotic relation between human and non-human elements that can be translated in the concepts previously mentioned. It seems this form of love and knowledge, *aloha 'āina,* that is transformed into a counter-discursive concept that, ultimately, challenges coloniality in Hawai'i. According to the poem, "an Umbilical chord biding us not only to the world's natural/ resources but to each other" (Osorio 2018, 69). "We" is figuratively alluding to all beings—human or not—whose connections come from a primordial link, an extended "umbilical chord" that makes us all part of something bigger,

something that transcends the materiality of bodies, an extended genealogy that bonds us together. Consequently, the possibility for decolonial practices to be enacted resides in the assumption that within the conceptualization of *aloha ʻāina* people are inseparable from their ecosystems, and this assumption informs Native Hawaiian struggles based upon this ethics of care. It is my understanding, then, that *aloha ʻāina* purposes an ethics of care that needs to be considered when examining Osorio's poem in relation with Native Hawaiian struggles against ingrained injustices. Ultimately, Osorio's sense of *aloha ʻāina* appears articulated in her form of denouncing ecological exploitation, structural racism affecting Indigenous people, and certainly as a decolonial counter-narrative that has also been part of the discourses of Hawaiian sovereignty movements that encapsulate multiple forms of caring for the environment. Rather than looking for silences or silenced subjects that may eventually speak from the margins, Osorio's poem is informed by the power of what can be said, and the importance of education as a form of resistance against institutionalized racism and the legacies of the empire. With all that said, Osorio is actively working to make invisible violence visible, and to raise awareness for the importance of the connection between human and non-human elements.

I-LAND-NESS

In 2021, Sia Figiel published the poem "I-Land-Ness" in the latest anthology of Indigenous literatures titled *Indigenous Pacific Islander Eco-Literatures*. The anthology itself represents a landmark in contemporary Indigenous literatures as well as it weaves together a tapestry of dialogues across Oceania that intend to revitalize Indigenous epistemologies and ways of knowing in tandem with how Indigenous peoples grapple with the enormity of colonialism and anthropogenic climate change. The multiplicity of works presented in the anthology span from Oceanian narratives, the threat of sea-mining to the honoring of Pacific fights against land exploitation, being water and land central concepts of indigenous cultural identity and genealogy. Hence, Planet Earth is sacred, a source of life in all forms that has to be treated with respect, care, and love. These stories are forms of self-representation, they shape indigenous relationships to

existence, and they are informed by multiple definitions of belonging, place, and reclamation. In the same vein, Sia Figiel composes a poem whose content is profoundly visual in terms of how humans interact with land.

Land in Euro-American and colonial epistemologies is a commodity that can be bought and sold and taken into ownership. Accordingly, land occupation and its militarization are consequences of settler colonialism, which simultaneously employed processes of dispossession and enforced slavery. Hence, it fostered methods of changing the land, transforming the Earth, its peoples, the plants, the composition of the soils, and the atmosphere. It was about extracting minerals, spreading diseases, altering landscapes (Crosby 1994). Overall, these acts were intimately entwined with the pervasive project of erasure that is the imperative of colonialism. Therefore, as in other colonized areas, "a changed ecology also introduced a changed political system that, in the eyes of the nationalist poet or visionary, seemed retrospectively to have alienated the people from their authentic traditions" (Said 1993, 77). In Native Samoan culture—as in many other Pacific cultures—the conceptualization of land is relational, a living and breathing family member that one is descended from (Gabbard 2018). Land is, then, an embodied subject that constitutes itself in relation with other subjects and vice-versa. Challenging the colonial narrative of progress, Sia Figiel's poem starts by questioning the ruins and devastation of the empire.

The conceptual meaning of the poem begins in its title, the hyphenated nature of it and the way Figiel intentionally creates a wordplay between "I" the individual, the human, and "land," the non-human element that has been severely abused by that other I. In English language the suffix "ness" means state, condition, quality, thus the title of the poem allegorically alludes to the symbiotic relation between the I and the Land as correlated elements of the same thing. However, the hyphen may be comprehended as the separation between those elements, an imposed separation that questions the survival of the two elements. What may be of the I if separated from the land? What are the chances of survival? What, then, is the planetary consciousness that should inform the response to those questions? Perhaps, one possible answer may be related with the

dismantling of binary and hegemonic constructions of power that still marginalize Indigenous ways of knowing.

This form of disconnection between subject and land is presented through the astonishment of the author while crossing Turtle Island[1] and looking at the number of battered animals lying alongside the roads, "We were often stunned into / Silence by the number / Of possums, racoons / Rabbits, snakes / Foxes, porcupines / Deer, turtles / That lay battered" (Figiel 2021, 162). Cars passing by oblivious, plastic flowers adorning the dead bodies. The same plastic flowers that eventually will end up filling the oceans and destroying multiple marine life forms. In fact, plastic is one of the biggest threats that oceans face today, causing untold harm to ecosystems, tremendous economic damage to coastal communities and posing a potential health problem for three billion people whose livelihood depends on the sea, and it is still one of the materials mostly used on every item bought on a large scale. Food comes wrapped up in plastic, clothes are filled with micro plastics that will travel through water and end up inside of marine creatures. This is the legacy of waste that shores in the Pacific coastlines: plastic bottles, plastic bags, chewing gums, fragments of polyester clothes, nuclear debris, electronic components, waste from cargoes and cruise ships, and medical waste. They are all part of the interminable list of 'things' that enter the oceans every day, being this a portrait of the Anthropocene, an era shaped by climate changes and environmental catastrophes. Accordingly, George Handley (2015) asserts that "climate change has introduced the problem of a human agency that is so profoundly collective that accountability for the changes wrought on the climate is no easy matter to trace" (333). Furthermore, it is fundamental to think that natural disasters simultaneously manifest historical vulnerabilities that cannot be untangled from power structures and are produced by human actions whose accountability has been obscured by certain discourses that claim the

[1] Turtle Island is the name attributed to Planet Earth and to North America by some Indigenous peoples, and it is based on creation stories / myths common to Indigenous peoples from North America. The poem starts with the description of a year-long journey across Turtle Island in which the two human protagonists are stunned by the level of destruction inflicted upon the ecosystems and its animals in clear contrast with progress and the fast automobiles that cut their way oblivious of everything else.

'newness' of an environmental crisis rather than paying attention to the historical endurance of dispossession caused by empire (DeLoughrey 2019).

As the poem progresses, we are still confronted with this predatory attitude towards nature, its objectification and exploitation described using speed cars passing by oblivious of everything else that surrounds them. Roads are the representative of progress, that same progress that did not consider anything else aside from its economic goals. Occasionally, the two human subjects in the poem are seen and helped by the driver whereas "the movements of wildlife stuck beneath their impetuous tires" (Figiel 2021, 162) repeatedly and indisputably proves how human beings are oblivious to fauna and flora, and how progress/modernity/globalization attempted at supplanting the necessity to care for any other non-human species. The descriptive use of vocabulary reiterates the permanent idea of destruction and how oblivious and indifferent human beings act in the face of that. The impetuous tires, for instance, are a metaphor of the reckless behavior of human beings.

In a form of a journey, one moves from Turtle Island—the first part of the poem fully characterized by ruin, death and oblivion—to Louisiana—the second part of the poem—where a funeral for an owl is held. The moment is profoundly solemn, and all the elements described are from nature in contrast with the plastic flowers previously used to adorn the roadsides. The owl found next to the road was wrapped up in sycamore leaves and returned to the land. This simple ceremony is vested in symbolism as in Samoan cosmology, humans descend from an owl. It further summarizes the kinship to the land and one another as experiences of 'spiritual continuity.' Therefore, placing the bird in the land allegorically alludes to those symbiotic connections that are part of Indigenous concerns when it comes to the altering of their ecosystems, and it reinforces that all beings are interrelated, and it also alludes to a cyclical perspective of life in which death may represent returning to an initial state of purity. Besides, it is in this act of kindness—holding a ceremony to a dead bird—that I broadly understand affect as a force that "fuses the body with the imagination into an ethical synthesis that bears directly on the micro-powers inherent in everyday interactions" (Park et al. 2011, 15). In other words, the affect demonstrated here reiterates an ethics of care that is part of

Indigenous cultures, and whose actions reflect upon how fauna, flora, animals, lands, and oceans need to be treated and protected. The last lines of the poem describe a flock of geese in V formation which can be read as an auspicious sign. A sign that when the "I" reconnects with the land there is a certain rhetoric of hope that can be applied to dismantle and to resist the long history of colonial and military occupation. Nonetheless, for this counternarrative to be effective and complete, it needs to accommodate Indigenous epistemologies and cosmologies. What is perhaps the most powerful and telling difference between the two parts of the poem is that one is predicated on violence generated by progress while the other is centered on love by returning the dead owl to land. There is a cyclical perspective here that implies the interdependency of which all beings are connected. By emphasizing love, the ceremonial nature of the last part of the poem presents an Indigenous ethics of care that derives from the sharing storied place[2] between human and nonhuman others. This ethics of care presented by Sia Figiel can also be perceived as an embodied relation to our future(s), human and otherwise in which love is assumed as a decolonial practice.

PRAISE SONG FOR OCEANIA

"Praise Song for Oceania" by Craig Santos Perez is an eco-poem-film that was written for the celebration of the World's Ocean Day, in 2016. In 2017, the poem was used in an eco-film with the same title created by the Hawaiian filmmaker Justyn Ah Chong and screened in several film festivals across the Pacific and the United States. The collaborative work between Perez and Chong generates a sensorial and immersive experience. It showcases how aesthetically and poetically attune to water imagery as a performance whose content oscillates between human and beyond human relationships.

[2] I am drawing on Cristina Bacchilega's studies on Native Hawaiian culture and the politics of places (2007). Bacchilega explains that storied place refers to the definition of places as "an emotionally, narratively, and historically layered experience" (35). Hence, place also translated as land is sensed, lived, experienced, contested and struggled over based on Indigenous cosmologies and the symbiotic relation between human and non-human elements.

In sixteen stanzas, the author explores how violent colonial histories intersect with environmental precarity when choosing figurative vocabulary to describe that exact violence "your capacity to endure the violation / of those who name you / who claim domain / over you who map you" (Perez 2020, 101), creating a living text that is the enactment of the art of acknowledging the ocean's grief. Throughout the poem Craig Santos Perez utters the importance of raising awareness about human interaction with the ocean by speaking directly to the ocean and creating a strong dialogue between us—as humans—and the natural elements, and does so by tracing back the ocean's exploitation to the maritime expansionism that characterized Western empires from the 16th century onwards.

The poem presents a complex, energetic vision of a world in transformation, of oceans that are exploited by people, thus acknowledging the importance of the ocean while also emphasizing our lack of appreciation for it when referring to tourism, invasive drilling, deep sea mining and intensive fishing (Perez 2020). The tone used to directly address the ocean fluctuates between anger and sorrow, though it also presents itself in caring terms as the author fully recognizes that despite the violence endured by the oceans, continuously perpetrated against them, they still are sources of nourishment, "praise your capacity / to survive our trawling / boats breaching / your open body" (Perez 2020, 102). Perez balances this dialogue between fierce accusations against human beings whose actions have been largely contributing to the disruption and destruction of entire ecosystems ironically introduced by using the repetition of "praise," and the recognition that oceans are central in the constitution of Indigenous collective identities. Throughout the poem, in an ongoing attempt to praise the ocean's capacity to regenerate and to forgive, the author reminds us that without hope we cannot return to love, and while the poem denounces tragedy and abuses, it centers itself on the renewing power of love.

In addition, Perez's poem maps out global imperialist and capitalist conditions of modern approaches to the ocean viewed as a commodity. Central to this construction are the recurring ideas of adaptation of the ocean that serves as a human laboratory for multiple experiments, namely a nuclear testing ground and a garbage dump, as well as

its description as a site of resistance "praise your library of drowned stories praise your museum of lost treasures your archive of desire / praise your tidalectic theory praise our migrant routes" (Perez 2020, 102). As a trope, metaphor moves from one object to another—in this case, ocean to laboratory and ocean to archive/memory—in a way that renders what might be invisible visible. Yet, an extractivist idea of the Earth's resources persists throughout the poem as the most fundamental critique to human action. In this way, the poem contests the Western discourse that has transformed the ocean into a globalized property, while also challenges hyper-localizing discourses that eventually turn oceans into isolated, static locations. Therefore, oceanic movements and ecologies help us think through water, waves, and tides ensuring that no environmental or poetic space in this poem is described as neutral or static. Ultimately an occupied space, it rather shows the genealogical connections and common heritages that are shared by all human beings. These spaces can be read as hyper-relational, adaptive, and grounded in particular legacies, as well as affected by particular traumas, while looking to persistent Oceanian futures in which the relationship between human and more-than-human elements should be infused with affect, care, and respect as we should praise our "blue planet/ one world ocean praise/ our trans-oceanic/ past present and future" (Perez 2020, 104).

In exploring people's relationship with water as an embodied entity, addressing the ocean as an "open body" whose features span from "smothering whales and schools of fish" (Perez 2020, 102) saving them from human cruelty to "enduring the violation of those who name you and claim domination / who map you empty ocean" (103), Perez's poem establishes multiple connections with economy and social life as well as hardships and inequalities, "your capacity to dilute our sewage and radioactive waste and plastics" (Perez 2020, 103). The nuclear tests in the Pacific were foundational to the understanding of power relations and constructions of vulnerability that have greatly impacted on the livelihood of Indigenous nations. Consequently, large amounts of radiation were released into the ocean and atmosphere with long-term radiological effects. Therefore, the author insists on enumerating all those aggressions in clear contrast with the oceans'

ability to recover, to forgive. However, that effort does not imply that we should forget but rather that we must act in order to envision a decolonized future.

It is, thus, this transformative capacity attributed to the ocean that closes the poem and infuses its readers with a sense of hope but also some kind of cruel optimism. The last part of the poem praises resilience, hope, and simultaneously posits a clear request for a world without war, a denuclearized planet, and demilitarized territories in which trans-indigenous and transnational coalitions are formed, "praise your capacity for communion / praise your vision of belonging / praise your blue planet / one world ocean praise / our trans-oceanic past present future flowing through our blood" (Perez 2020, 104). This embodied ocean encapsulates shared experiences, shared concerns and a shared decolonial love that simultaneously aims at liberating Indigenous peoples from the legacy of colonial violence and destabilizing the Western binarism between human and non-human figures. Ending the poem with the promising note that we praise the ocean's "capacity for hope / (…) praise your sacred water walkers / praise your activist kayaks" (Perez 2020, 104), Perez refuses to conform with discourses of fatalism and rather chooses to establish a bridge between the ocean's capacity to regenerate and the human obligation to take action to protect it from further damage.

In sum, the poem foregrounds the idea of interconnection and interrelatedness of humans, nature, and other species as well as the centrality of the ocean in the conception of indigenous genealogies, identities, and communities. Moreover, especially considering those aspects and the current global crisis of water scarcity, it is relevant to look for communion and coalitions that aim at praising trans-oceanic futurities. Ultimately, the poem asks us to re-examine conventions about human nature, and how those conventions lead to the reproduction of certain ways of living in economic, political, and social terms. While Western views of human nature have largely become rooted in dominant socioeconomic and global capitalistic systems, Indigenous views may be precisely what is necessary to create more equitable and sustainable futures. The frameworks that link environmental justice movements equally call for an increased attention to "systems of responsibility" that incorporate "of interspecies relationships" (Whyte 2013, 518). Finally, it can be argued that it is through an Indigenous

ecopoetics that highlights the sacredness of the earth that the author honors the earth and the ocean as ancestors while protesting against environmental degradation, and asserts that land and the seas are sites of healing, belonging, resistance, and mutual care.

CONCLUSION

The islands in the Pacific Ocean have been colonized in multiple ways, and during different periods of time in history with different degrees of violence enacted against their Indigenous peoples. This ongoing process of global imperialism cannot solely be addressed in economic and political terms, but it should also be considered in terms of how these islands were and still are intellectually occupied and conceptually shaped by Europe and the USA. Hence, in nearly two centuries, Pacific Islanders saw it all, the changes brought with colonialism and the lingering effects of imperial policies that have culminated in partial disintegration of Indigenous cultures. Unsurprisingly, a considerable proportion of Indigenous Pacific literature creates a counter-discursive approach to Western violence enacted against Indigenous peoples. Within current debates about Indigenous cultures, questions related with gender, race, and cultural commodification have been extensively addressed. Moreover, it is also significantly demonstrated that Western fantasies about 'the Other' are continually exploited through filmography, advertisements, tourism, and "cannibalistic consumerism" (hooks 1992) that not only translate Indigenous cultures into Western cultural modes but also deny the significance of their histories through multiple processes of decontextualization. There is a subjacent cultural imperialism in these forms of cultural appropriation, and often it perpetuates systemic violence against Indigenous peoples whose cultures are exploited to fulfil Western colonial nostalgia. Within this context of exploitation, gender, race and ecosystems are transformed into commodified assets for pleasure and the cultures of Indigenous peoples perceived "as constituting an alternative playground where members of dominating races, genders, sexual practices affirm their power-over in intimate relations with the Other" (hooks 1992, 367).

Accordingly, the poems problematize and critically question the impact of global policies upon Indigenous communities as well as they present examples of resistance that are generating transcultural movements. Each of these authors presents stimulating questions that trace environmental degradation back to the colonial encounter while demonstrating that their Indigenous societies developed complex and sustainable relationships with the environment that were disrupted by colonialism and subsequently by globalization in clear relation with various forms of extractivism and petrocultures. Moreover, the voices of these writers resonate through waves of anger against the harm that has been inflicted upon ecosystems, and thus their poems are ways of denouncing injustices, and, to a certain extent, they seem to ensure cultural survival when assuming a strategic significance as counternarratives to the Americanization of the islands. Consequently, my analysis of the poems aimed at demonstrating that coalitions formed among Pacific Islanders respond to the imperial West and resist land occupation, and environmental degradation. Patrick Wolfe (2006) emphasizes that "invasion is a structure and not an event" (388). Since this structural colonialism is not historically limited to the past but an ongoing process, the process of decolonization cannot be limited to decolonial thinking and epistemological deconstruction of colonial mindsets, it has to be extended to lands and oceans. Ecosystems have to be fully considered rather than being apprehended as secondary in relation to humans and anthropocentric views of the world. The restoration of lands, places (and even perhaps identities) happens through symbolic acts of imagination, including those within the frameworks of literature. Eventually, they weave together a sense of place and belonging long disrupted by foreign cultural fabrications, touristic fantasies, and apparatus. Following Edward Said (1994), it can be argued that imaginative futurities are fundamental in decolonizing the mind because they serve as the locus where "the land is recoverable at first only through the imagination" (225). The significance of geography, belonging and the sense of place are crucial in the construction of narratives about the Pacific in which there is a clear anti-imperialist perspective in a tourist-globalized-driven era. Ultimately, literature functions as a decolonizing practice in which multiple meanings are accommodated validating a powerful form of political expression and "in a world

permeated by insidious yet unseen and imperceptible violence, imaginative writing can help make the unapparent appear" (Nixon 2011, 15).

The ecopoetic conversation that I have been referring to encompasses much more than attention to socio-cultural constructions of flora and fauna. But, as Jonathan Skinner elaborates on, it fundamentally comprises a critique of Western modernity itself: "any ecopoetics is always already an *ethnopoetics*. It traces the boundaries of a logocentrism that will go unquestioned by even the most radical poststructuralist poets and philosophers when they fail to link the foundation of Western rationalism (the *cogito*) to the repression of subaltern, indigenous writing systems" (Hume 2012, 763).

Consequently, the poems selected here attempt at offering discursive spaces through which it may be possible to imagine and reimagine decolonial futures based on love, hope, and affinity. Besides, it is also the recognition of violence perpetrated against Indigenous ecosystems, Indigenous peoples and their dehumanization that showcases the extent to which colonialism remains ingrained in contemporary societal models, i.e, the permanent occupation of lands to serve the Global North.

There is also an assumed critique to colonial/Western views of nature as a separate and empty dimension that exists to be exploited and to generate profit. In sum, the tapestry woven by the poems selected here highlights the importance of activism, education, care, and love as actions that simultaneously denounce multiple forms of slow violence against Indigenous cultures and generate decolonial discourses. Therefore, they map out an ethic of care and obligation/accountability along the lines of Vandana Shiva's (2005) model of an "earth democracy" which is derived not from moments of crisis but, rather, from the everyday actions. She argues, "We [must] base our globalization on ecological processes and bonds of compassion and solidarity, not the movement of capital" (5). This is an *embodied* practice that resonates the love and care of the land as Osorio describes in her poem, for example, or the love of the ocean in Perez's poem, because ultimately "we *are* the food we eat, the water we drink, the air we breathe" (Shiva 2005, 5), and thus the importance of protecting all ecosystems regardless cartographies and geopolitical borders. Ultimately, we are interdependent beings, always in relation rather than in isolation. While *aloha ʻāina* and Hawaiian cosmology depict

the intrinsic kinship to nonhuman nature or environment by Kānaka Maoli, I connect the meanings of this relationality with the need for dynamic action grounded in community as well. It is both the description of relationality with other islanders and islands, and the relationality to the land and the oceans that precisely informs decolonial practices and movements across the globe.

Overall, the poems read together develop a notion of "reflexive solidarity" (Mohanty 2003) which is particularly useful to comprehend the extent to which it remains crucial to form coalitions for the possibility of futures to be imagined. Mohanty (2003) addresses this reflexive solidarity in terms of "mutuality, accountability, and the recognition of interests as the basis for relationships among diverse communities" (7). Moreover, this notion of solidarity embodies "the result of active struggle to construct the universal on the basis of particulars/differences" (7) that actively responds to the American construction of the Pacific and the Caribbean (for the matter) as strategic locations for military experimentation and the production of new scientific epistemologies. While focusing on processes that have disempowered Indigenous peoples and undermined their ways of knowing and organizing social life, it is crucial to acknowledge that Indigenous peoples continuously resist and fight back ecological degradation as a way of ensuring that the future is possible for the planet. Contemporary Indigenous literatures of the Pacific are inextricably connected with social movements, thus the poems by Osorio, Perez, and Figiel foreground Indigenous socio-cultural practices and contribute to the ongoing debate about land occupation and ecological degradation. It can be argued that Indigenous writing is "a powerful tool in the struggles against colonialism and in the subsequent efforts to cast off the legacies of empire and dispossession" (Ballantyne & Patterson 2020, 5). Their contribution to processes of decolonization of Indigenous cultures and societies of the Pacific occurs through the representation of multiple social, political, and cultural aspects related with those Indigenous cultures. The textualization of their cultures becomes fundamental in raising awareness for shared struggles in which multiple perspectives are (re)inscribed in the officialized and politicized version of Indigenous historical narratives that are often written from a Western standpoint (Trask 1999; Silva 2004).

Taken together, the poems create a sense of despair tinged with hope, and it is hope that drives the need to decolonize the future. Hence, hope is simultaneously invoked as awareness of the present world that involves struggles, upheavals and losses, and the promising uncertainty of imagined pathways. However, hope is not naively assumed, or simply taken as *the* solution, on the contrary it involves critical and informed perspectives on the current trajectories of globalized and militarized policies as well as it looks for alternative modes of empowering people. At times when Indigenous peoples are navigating cruel forms of environmental degradation, ecological racism, and continuous loss of rights over their lands, hope could possibly be perceived as willful blindness to reality. It is my argument that hope does not necessarily mean lack of awareness, rather it contingently responds to injustices, injuries and precarity that typify the world. Hope in this context assumes a structural engagement with social life. Additionally, the poems also propose a politicized approach to hope as an engaged mode of contesting both present realities and the future. The politicized agenda of hope is crafted on action, accountability, and responsibility, and ultimately "hope is not simply given to people by the broader world, however; it is enabled by their connections with her world, including how they see, feel, act, and imagine" (Shewry 2015, 3).

Moreover, and despite the enormous change in mentalities, nature is still apprehended on the basis of its non-human features which clearly implies a lack of practices that step out from the obvious and perilous binarism human *versus* nonhuman. In contrast, the epistemological position that characterizes Indigenous peoples overtly encapsulates the fact that nature is an entity worth protection and respect, so that Indigenous struggles will always remain connected with environmental protection. Nonetheless, in order to move forward, societies in general should be able to acknowledge the still visible consequences of ongoing colonial practices that have affected Indigenous people, and those include the loss of lands, environmental self-determination, and the right to protect their sacred sites from being used either to build resorts, golf camps or military facilities/infrastructures. In sum, it is crucial to build solidarity across the divisions of place, gender, class, race, and identity. In these very fragmented and complex times we are living in, it may be fundamental to question globalization and capitalism from an

angle that uncovers their masculinist and racist values and extractivist practices. What if we look at nature through the lens of care and love? Will we become more observant if love towards all beings—human or otherwise—is constructed outside the anthropocentric views we usually apply? Assuming all those possibilities, we may become more apt to dismantle the oppressive systems that have been imposed on Planet Earth and be able to foster ecological justice.

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