

***from* Guåhan: culture and identity in the aftermath of colony  
in Craig Santos Perez's [*guma'*]**

Reviewed by Marthe Reed

Craig Santos Perez's new book [*guma'*] (Omnidawn 2014) is the third in his series *from Unincorporated Territory*. Addressing the cultural, social, political, and environmental aftermath of 500 years of colonial (mis)rule in Guam (Guåhan), Perez weaves this hybrid text together out of eight discrete narrative strands, layering his shifting foci as he moves deftly across time frames to construct a window onto the complicated present of Guamanian life, identity, and land.

What intrigues me most about this collection, beyond its multi-stranded texture, is the central motif of *from*. Perez announces this motif not only in the subtitle of his series, but in the language of the collection itself. Each of the pieces which comprise the book are described as *from* one or other of the eight discrete narrative strands. However *from* is presented as *ginen*, the Chamoru word for *from*, privileging native language over any of the various colonial languages imposed upon the people of Guåhan. *From/ginen* asserts the fundamental identity of poet, speaker, island, and culture. These hybrid pieces—sometimes lineated poems, sometimes prose narratives, sometimes autobiography in the guise of folk tales, sometimes documentary material, often more than one mode at work simultaneously—do not interrogate the notion of identity but rather assert its nature. In the first of the pieces *ginen ta(la)ya* (a throw net for fishing), Perez juxtaposes Ezra Pound's dismissive assertion of the valuelessness of Guam (from a radio speech during WWII) with a traditional Chamoru prayer and the narrative of Perez's dislocation from Guåhan when his family to California and his subsequent intent to pay for college via military service and his ex-military father's intervention; Perez next juxtaposes the Japanese attack and occupation of Guåhan with the attack on the World Trade Center with the catastrophic infestation of brown snakes on Guåhan bird species, the US invasion of Iraq, and the over-representation of Guåhan people in the US military. These interpolated threads in their uneasy companionship, presented without analysis or explanation, vividly evoke the cultural, ecological, and personal violence felt by the people of Guåhan under the "benevolent" control of the United States and its military. In his catalogues of the Guåhan dead, Perez lines out all details except the name of the deceased soldier, asserting the primacy of the person, privileging the personal and cultural over national notions of "valor" and "service" to country.

Perez's hybridity marries the Guåhan folk hero Juan Malo's narratives of resistance to Spanish colonial rule, to contemporary Guåhan experience. The collection opens with one of these "malalogues" or "bad" stories, itself preceded by an extended quote from Albert Wendt's analysis of the contesting functions of maps of the Pacific. Collating together 'descriptions' of the island territory as given by the colonial power and its economic/cultural aftermath, Perez ironically situates the reader within the complicated ground of life on Guåhan for the Chamoru people.

Guam is "Where America's Day Begins." Guam is the "westernmost furthest forward sovereign US territory in the Pacific." Guam is a non-self-governing colony. Guam is a US citizen since the 1950 Organic Act. Guam is part of the US Postal System (GU, 96910-96932). Guam "reps" the "671." Guam is a duty-free Perot outside the US Customs Zone. Guam is expected to homeport the Pacific Fleet. Guam is an acronym for "Give Us American Military." Guam is a pivot point in a realignment of US forces in the Pacific. Guam is a target. Guam is America's front porch to Asia. Guam is a mini Hawai'i. Guam is strategically invisible. Guam is published by the Guam Hotel & Restaurant Association and the Guam Visitors Bureau. Guam is a beach for sunburnt tourists in bikinis. Guam is an acronym for "Give Us Asian Money." Guam is air-conditioned." (13)

In adopting the persona and prerogative of the trickster, Perez ironically re-situates the received 'map' and nature of Guåhan: Perez-as-Juan Malo will be the collection's guide and authority against the dogma of the colonizer's history, playfully and potently reasserting Guåhan's language, culture, and history against the discourses imposed upon it.

In "*ginen* tidelands," Perez uses enjambment and juxtaposition to create a juttering stutter, through the gaps of which an alternative account of place—environment and landscape—is afforded. Against Spanish place names, US military excavations and installations, a language of the lost is re-asserted. First species' names in Chamoru, crossed out, effaced, then the reassertion of colony's authority:

silt  
habitat--

~~toninos~~  
~~tanguisson~~

~~atuhong~~  
~~halu'u~~

~~haggan bed'di~~  
~~haggan karai~~

permanent  
loss—

~

coral weaves  
dead

and living  
branches clusters

algae mats and  
fronds across

generations to buried  
coral bones— (42-3)

Perez closes the poem with double entendre. The death of the coral, the crisis of the island ecology, erasure the people and culture, these are figured as a blessed "birth" in the ongoing consequences of colony: "baptize [us] / in the turning // basin of / nuclear berth--"

Adopting a collage aesthetic and documentary method, Perez works by juxtaposition. In "ginen fatal impact statements" Perez ironically incorporates excerpts of public comments from Draft Environmental Impact statements with the unstated but omnipresent resolve of the U.S. government and military to expatriate Guåhan land to its own purposes. In "ginen the Micronesian kingfisher [*I sihek*]," lineated language addressing the the off-island effort to preserve the species by captive breeding are inter-spliced with quotes from the participant zoos: Perez asserts, "what does not change / is the will / to see," (63) implicitly challenging the agency or lack thereof of those who "see." "ginen ta(la)ya" incorporates the names of Guåhan U.S. military service personnel who have died in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars: each name carefully lined through, ironically contrasting Guåhan commitment to the U.S. against their lack of any elected representation at the national level. Weaving together documentary, anecdote, ecology, personal experience, and history, Perez evokes the fractured, fragmented condition of life in Guåhan from a native perspective.

The collection's movement between the personal, ecological, cultural and the overtly colonial/political/military mirrors the speaker's movements between "home" (Guåhan) and elsewhere (California, Hawaii) through the hybrid role of trickster/poet/documentarian. Composing a hybrid text in language hybridized by colonization, Perez dynamically affords the reader entry into Guåhan's complicated eco-polis, a vivid window unto his complicated love of place. A potent collection, Craig Santos Perez's [*guma'*] from *Unincorporated Territory* offers a dynamic, generative "bridge" of language sustaining love and loss simultaneously.

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Marthe Reed is the author of five books: *Nights Reading* (Lavender Ink 2014), *Pleth*, a collaboration with j hastain (Unlikely Books 2013), *(em)bodied bliss* (Moria Books 2013), *Gaze* (Black Radish Books 2010) and *Tender Box, A Wunderkammer* (Lavender Ink 2007). She has published chapbooks as part of the Dusie Kollektiv, as well as with above / ground press and Shirt Pocket Press. Her collaborative chapbook *thrown*, text by j hastain with Reed's collages, won the 2013 Smoking Glue Gun contest and will appear in Spring 2015. She is Co-Publisher of Black Radish and the Editor/Publisher of *Nous-zõt* chapbooks. Her reviews have appeared in *Rain Taxi*, *Jacket2*, *The Volta*, and *Galatea Ressurrects*, among other journals.