

Three American Eco-poets: Camille Dungy, Brenda Hillman, Craig Santos Perez

As the environmental crisis has worsened in recent decades, hundreds of American poets have addressed it in their writing. When Laura-Gray Street and I coedited the 625-page *Ecopoetry Anthology* (first published in 2013), which included work by eighty poets from Walt Whitman to James Schuyler and over 200 poets from around 1965 into the twenty-first century, it seemed to us that our anthology plus Camille Dungy's 2009 edited collection *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry* had pretty well covered the territory. But ecopoetry and ecopoetry anthologies have continued to proliferate. To name only a few, there are *The Arcadia Project: North American Postmodern Pastoral* (2012), edited by Joshua Corey and G. C. Waldrep; *Fire and Rain: Ecopoetry of California* (2018), edited by Lucille Lang Day and Ruth Nolan; *Ghost Fishing: An Eco-Justice Poetry Anthology* (2018), edited by Melissa Tuckey; *Odes & Elegies: Eco-Poetry from the Texas Gulf Coast* (2020), edited by Katherine Hoerth; and *Poetics for the More-than-Human World: An Anthology of Poetry and Commentary* (2020), edited by Mary Newell, Bernard Quetchenbach, and Sarah Nolan. Furthermore, though several of the poets in *The Ecopoetry Anthology* have died since it was published, most of the others have continued to pour forth work. And still others not part of *The Ecopoetry Anthology* are writing exceptional and urgent poetry, among them Jericho Brown, Nickole Brown, Vieve Francis, Ross Gay, Luisa A. Igloria, Layli Long Soldier, Valerie Martinez, Rose McLarney, Simon Ortiz, Brian Teare, Orchid Tierney, and Heidi Staples. This essay cannot begin to do justice to the plenitude and variety of contemporary politically-engaged ecopoetry; instead, I will focus on three major poets writing in this vein: Camille Dungy, Brenda Hillman, and Craig Santos Perez.

One strength of Camille Dungy's poetry is her sense of interconnectedness between her personal life, human history, and the nonhuman world. Her work is deeply informed by the first principle of ecology, interrelatedness between all organisms in their environment. Her love and imagination extend outward from herself and her family—her parents, husband, daughter—to past and present others in the human community, and to other-than-human beings, all of whom, or which, share in the rich fabric of life. Ebullient and abundant, level and candid, she can be, by turns, funny, sorrowful, joyful, angry, passionate. Her proclivity for pleasure is enormous, but tempered by a stern awareness of human suffering and environmental damage. African American, feminist, environmentalist, Camille Dungy is a major American poet whose poetry reveals much about us and our times.

Born in Denver in 1972, Dungy moved often as a child; her father, an academic physician, taught at various medical schools around the United States. She attended Stanford and received her MFA from the University of North Carolina, Greensboro. Her own teaching career began at Randolph-Macon Woman's College (now Randolph College) in Lynchburg, Virginia; from there she moved to San Francisco State, and in 2014, to Colorado State University, where she is a University Distinguished Professor. She is married to Ray Black; they have one daughter, Callie.

Dungy has published four books of poems: *What to Eat, What to Drink, and What to Leave for Poison* (2006), *Suck on the Marrow* (2010), *Smith Blue* (2011), and *Trophic Cascade* (2017). Her poetry has received the American Book Award (twice), a California Book Award silver medal,

and the 2018 Colorado Book Award in Poetry—among other prizes. She is an acclaimed essayist, whose *Guidebook to Relative Strangers: Journeys into Race, Motherhood, and History* (2017) was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. Dungy is also an important editor, especially of the groundbreaking anthology *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry* (2009), which has become a seminal text for poetic, environmental, and African American studies. Among her various other honors are a Guggenheim Award and National Endowment for the Arts fellowships in both poetry and prose. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/camille-t-dungy>) In September 2021 she was awarded the Academy of American Poets Fellowship.

The sonnet corona “What to Eat, What to Drink, and What to Leave for Poison” closes Dungy’s first book, and is a fine example of her grounding in nature. Written while she lived in Virginia, it riotously celebrates the coming of spring. “Only now, in spring, can the place be named,” the sequence begins:

tulip poplar, daffodil, crab apple,
dogwood, budding pink-green, white-green, yellow
on my knowing. All winter I was lost.
Fall, I found myself here, with no texture
my fingers know. Then, worse, the white longing
that downed us deep three months. No flower heat.
That was winter. (79)

“The world is charged with the grandeur of God,” wrote Gerard Manley Hopkins more than a century ago (“God’s Grandeur”). As Dungy’s poems turn toward spring, they share, but naturalize, this praise, and attest to the deep indwelling connection between human and other-than-human. After homages to blossoming dogwoods, daffodils, crab apples, tulip poplars, the corona’s final poem ends,

Something like the birds’ return, each morning’s
crescendo rising toward its brightest pitch,
colors unfurling, petals alluring.
The song, the color, the rising ecstasy
of spring. My God. This beauty. This, this
is what I’ve hoped for. All my life is here
in the unnamed core—dogwood, daffodil,
tulip poplar, crab apple, crepe myrtle—
only now, in spring, can the place be named. (85)

Political urgency intensifies in Dungy’s third book, *Smith Blue*. A brilliant poem, “A Massive Dying Off,” skewers our—and her own—first-world inability to maintain focus on the human and environmental devastation caused by global capitalism. For instance:

You needed covers, pillows, disposable containers.
At Costco, everything comes cheap.

*Sea stars, jellies, anemones, all the scuttlers and hoverers
and clingers along the ocean floor. A massive dying off, further displacing
depleted oxygen, cried the radio announcer.*

You plugged in your iPod.
Enough talk. You'd found the song you had been searching for. (7)

Then the final section expands, becomes surreal: "In the dream, your father is the last refuse to wash ashore. / This wasn't what you wanted. / Any of you." The father becomes, in a sense, an Ur-figure; he is wrapped in papyrus like a Pharaoh, prayed over, loaded onto an outrigger like a Viking king, and all of human history seems to prepare for and participate in the present crisis, in which the dead body returns, "Stinking. / Swelling." The poem ends with what seems to be a grim warning of global warming and rising sea waters: "You can't dispose of the rising dead and you're worried. / What can you do?" (8-9)

Another poem from Dungy's California years, also with a political dimension, is the beautiful elegy "The Blue," which recounts the discovery of a tiny butterfly in 1948 at Big Sur by two undergraduates at UC Berkeley named Claude I. Smith and Rudi Mattoni. When Smith died a few years later in a fishing accident, Mattoni named the butterfly after his friend. This butterfly, which inhabits coastal dunes and cliffs from Monterey Bay south to near Point Gorda, cannot live elsewhere, and lays its eggs only on Coast and Seacliff Buckwheat. Therefore, in 1976 it was listed on the Federal Endangered Species Act.

(<https://courses.cit.cornell.edu/icb344/abstracts/Smiths-Blue.htm>). Dungy's poem describes both the men's joy at discovering the butterfly and the great losses that ensued: Mattoni's loss of his friend, the butterfly's loss of habitat, and the human loss of this beautiful coast. In a bitter pun she writes not of the caterpillar metamorphosed into a butterfly, but of the Caterpillar that wreaks so much environmental damage:

seacliff buckwheat cleared, relentless
ice plant to replace it, the wild fields bisected
by the scenic highway, canyons covered with cul-de-sacs,
gas stations, comfortable homes, the whole habitat
along this coastal stretch endangered, everything,
everyone everywhere in it in danger as well— (17)

Dungy's essay "Is All Writing Environmental Writing?" published in *The Georgia Review* in 2018, jives with her most recent book of poems, *Trophic Cascade*. In the essay she argues that all writing is indeed environmental writing, for "even indifference to the environment directly affects the world," and furthermore that

[t]o separate the concerns of the human world . . . from those of the many life forms with which humans share this planet strikes me as disastrous hubris and folly. We live in community with all the other lives on Earth, whether we acknowledge this or not. When we write about our lives, we ought to do so with an awareness of the other lives we encounter as we move through the world.

(<https://thegeorgiareview.com/posts/is-all-writing-environmental-writing/>)

Trophic Cascade abundantly bears out this sense of interconnection. Trophic cascades, which can be of various kinds, are “powerful indirect interactions that can control entire ecosystems” (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trophic_cascade) As Dungy is using the phrase in her eponymous poem, it refers to the phenomenon observed in Yellowstone: when gray wolves were reintroduced to the park some years ago, they culled deer, whose populations had become rampant; this culling permitted stunted trees and bushes to heal or re-establish, which in turn led to the return of songbirds, birds of prey, hares and other small animals, beavers that built dams, dams that harbored fishes, and so on. After describing the process of cascading life forms, Dungy turns to her own personal experience. Beautifully, this rich ecological process becomes an analogy for the changes happening in her own life:

Don't
you tell me this is not the same as my story. All this
life born from one hungry animal, this whole,
new landscape, the course of the river changed,
I know this. I reintroduced myself to myself, this time
a mother. After which, nothing was ever the same. (16)

The interconnectedness between Dungy's personal history, African American history, and the environment is particularly rich in *Trophic Cascade*. Joy suffuses the book, though leavened with anger, irony, humor. Dungy writes wonderfully about motherhood—about both how she has “loved every cell of [Callie's] body from the time I could count them / until now” (30) and how

It is all
I can do, most days, not to swallow
her up and curse her maker, I swear. Like I have not
sworn since the morning she was born. (59)

But also, there is grief. Dungy reminds us that our environment includes our history—for instance, her poems include the four little girls killed in the 1963 Birmingham church bombing (51); the Chinese and Polish and Salvadoran immigrant detainees locked up at Angel Island (55); slave mothers, “*All those women sold away // from their babies*” for whom a black steward on an airplane flight begins to weep when he sees Dungy rocking her baby (50). A remarkable poem, “Notes on what is always with us,” starts out to be about a birthday party the poet threw for her mother, but as she says, “grief came along / for the cake,” since three of the ten mothers at her mother's party had lost a child. Then the poem segues to penguins and their chicks, and thence to global warming, which enables ticks carried by cormorants to survive the winter and embed themselves in penguins' bodies, which in turn causes the penguins to abandon their nests and seek the relief of the water:

She will run and slide and dive into danger.

Her eggs will die and her chicks will die
and she may die as well.

The poem segues back to the memory of a happy afternoon with a friend—a friend who subsequently lost his partner and son—and concludes that grief rides in like a tick on a cormorant’s wing: “I was trying to write about beauty, but grief won’t stay away. // I was trying to write about babies and birthdays and birds. / I was trying to write about joy” (33-34).

“The job of a soul is to stay awake”

(“Day 11,” Metaphor & Simile: 24 journal poems at year’s end, *Extra Hidden Life, Among the Days*, p. 71)

A brilliantly innovative poet, Brenda Hillman draws upon Romanticism, Modernism, surrealism, science writing, sound and word play, forays into etymology, passages from official documents, bits of conversation, and scraps of found text, to create a lyric poetry of rare and difficult beauty. She dismantles the idea of the monolithic self, reducing the capital “I” to lower-case and speaking of herself not as “Brenda” but as many “brendas.” Her work is full of playful punctuation—for instance, to indicate the clicks of birds, the hesitations of thought, the stutter of a Congressional aide—and inhabits the page in a stunning array of open field compositions. A “sorceress looking for my sources” (“Hydrology of California,” *Practical Water*, 92), for years she has practiced trance writing, through which she bears witness to the consanguinity between nature and spirit. As she writes in “To a Desert Poet,” a poem in *Practical Water*, “*the features / of the world are the same / as the language of the soul*” (99).

Hillman was born in Tucson, Arizona, in 1951; though she has not lived there in adulthood, the desert continues to figure prominently in her writing, as for instance in the elegy sequence for her father, “The Rosewood Clauses,” in her most recent book, *Extra Hidden Life, Among the Days*. But the primary and beloved terrain of Hillman’s work is California—its deserts, coasts, cities, and mountains. She attended Pomona College in southern California and received her MFA from the University of Iowa. Long settled in the Bay Area, she holds the Olivia Filippi Chair in Poetry at St. Mary’s College in Moraga, directs the Community of Writers Poetry Workshop in Olympic Valley, and is married to the poet Robert Hass. Her work has received awards and fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Poetry Society of America, along with a Bay Area Book Reviewer’s Award, a Pushcart Prize, and the Delmore Schwartz Memorial Award. In 2012, she received the Academy of American Poets Fellowship. In 2016 she was elected a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets, and in 2017 she was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

<https://poets.org/poet/brenda-hillman>

Hillman is the author of ten books of poetry and the translator, editor, or coeditor of several additional volumes of poetry or essays. Of her books, the ones most centrally informed by ecopoetics and politics are *Cascadia* (2001), *Pieces of Air in the Epic* (2005), *Practical Water* (2011), *Seasonal Works with Letters on Fire* (2013), and *Extra Hidden Life, Among the Days* (2018). The first four of these celebrate, in turn, the four classical elements: earth, air, water, and fire. Of the fifth, Hillman writes, “When they ask ‘What are you working on now that the

elements are finished' i say the elements are never finished; in China they have metal, in India they have ether, in the West we are short on time. Wood has also been named as an element" ("Whose Woods These Are We Think," *Extra Hidden Life*, 4). Taken together, the five volumes comprise one of the farthest-ranging, most imaginative eco-poetic/ecopolitical interventions of our times.

A piece from *Seasonal Works* lays out the terrain and many of the methods of Hillman's work:

A—At times a poem might enact qualities brought from Romantic poetry, through Baudelaire, to modernism & beyond—freedom of form, expressivity, & content—taking these to a radical intensity, with uncertainty, complexity, contradiction;

B—such a poem employs knowledge from diverse disciplines—including scientific vocabularies, but it does not privilege only the human. Research includes rural and urban wilds as well as knowledge from all cultures; creative forms bring together earth & spirit, rejecting no sources, including the personal;

C—its energies shuttle across binaries: realism/non-realism, rationality/irrationality, refuting received authority;

D—such a poem like an animal could graze or hunt in its time, exploring each word, carrying symbolic rhythms, syntax & images directly between the dream & the myth; the imagination does not reject the spirit world:

E—then a poem is its own action, performing practical miracles:

- I. "the miracle of language roots"—to return with lexical adventures
2. "the miracle of perception"—to honor the senses
3. "the miracle of nameless feeling"—to reflect the weight of the subjective, the contours of emotion
4. "the miracle of the social world"—to enter into collective bargaining with the political & the social

F--& though powerless to halt the destruction of bioregions, the poem can be brought away from the computer. The poet can accompany acts of resistance so the planet won't die of the human.

("Ecopoetics Manifesto: A Draft for Angie," 29).

The "manifesto" well describes the heterogeneity of Hillman's work, with its constant elements of idiosyncrasy and surprise. But note in particular the last point, F, which expresses her combination of despair and determination—a clear-eyed acknowledgment of catastrophic environmental damage and nevertheless an unshakable commitment to activism, both of which have become increasingly urgent beginning with *Practical Water*.

In *Cascadia* and *Pieces of Air in the Epic*, activism takes place mainly in the writing; the poem itself is a field of action. The first of the tetralogy, *Cascadia*, takes its name from the landform that once underlay what is now California: "Where / Berkeley is, once a shallow sea with

city,” “The lost one is everywhere,” and with the advent of aerial warfare, the “global kill[s] people / it [will] never see” (“Nine Untitled Epyllions,” 46, 47, 49). The poet is the “seamstress,” stitching the cloth of the soul, but, she acknowledges, “my needle means / nothing to the State,” nor to the jovial mall-crowding citizens for whom “the war is forget forgot forgotten” (“Nine Untitled Epyllions, 47, 51, 52). As George Santayana remarked, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it,” and so the tragic myth still echoes in the present. “I, it, we, you, he they am, is, are, sick about America,” Hillman writes in “String Theory Sutra” (82). Thinking about her country and her students, the affection which is ubiquitous in her work mingles with both frustration and despair.

Students

dislike even thinking about Agamemnon. You
love the human species when you see them, even when they load
their backpacks early & check the
tiny screens embedded in their phones. (“Air in the Epic,” 9)

With *Practical Water*, Hillman begins to practice what she calls “reportorial poetry,” which records details “with immediacy while one is doing an action & thinking about something else” (“Reportorial Poetry, Trance & Activism,” 33). In particular in section Two, “Of Communal Authority,” the poetry becomes more activist, both reporting on her own and urging others to intervene directly in matters of state. The furious and wonderful poem “In a House Subcommittee on Electronic Surveillance” ends by addressing the reader:

You at home, what do you feel.
You can vote by calling 1-900-it’s-either-too-fucking-
late-or-too-early. There’s
a secret in every century that likes it
if you shout. There is time for our little secret.
There is space for the secret spilling out. (49)

One of Hillman’s most powerful expressions of the connections between ecopoetry and politics is “A Violet in the Crucible,” a poem in the section of *Practical Water* about the trips that she and other members of Code Pink made to Washington to attend Congressional hearings on the Iraq War. It takes its title from Percy Bysshe Shelley’s *A Defence of Poetry*, and comes from a passage about translation: “Hence the vanity of translation,” Shelley writes;

it were as wise to case a violet into a crucible that you might discover the formal principle of its color and odor, as seek to transfuse from one language into another the creations of a poetry. The plant must spring again from its seed, or it will bear no flower—and this is the burden of the curse of Babel.

The passage would seem to testify to the impossibility of “translating” poetry into the language of Congressmen who are discussing and defending the Pentagon budget—“*We cannot leave them / there without weapons,*” an aide stutters to the poet in explanation—and perhaps it does express a certain despair about the Babel that characterizes political discourse in our times. But accompanying the phrase “*a violet in the crucible*” in Hillman’s poem is the phrase “*imagination*

is enlarged by a sympathy,” the full sentence of which in Shelley’s essay is “The imagination is enlarged by a sympathy with pains and passions so mighty, that they distend in their conception the capacity of that by which they are conceived.” And behind that, though Hillman does not quote it, is this:

The great secret of morals is love; or a going out of our nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own. A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasure of his species must become his own. The great instrument of moral good is the imagination. (*A Defence of Poetry and Other Essays*)

Remove the phrase “of his species” and we arrive at Hillman’s deeply eco-poetic awareness that the poet is the legislator (in Shelley’s phrase) in human form, just as

the duskytail darter from Tennessee legislates or
the Indiana bat, *myotis sodalist*, the dwarf wedgemussel
half buried in Maryland with your bivalve
in silt of your wetland habitat, as you, the vanishing
northeastern bulrush from Massachusetts
legislate by shrinking; he doesn’t mean you will live,
he means you could live on listen. As the sturgeon
in a million pounds of phosphorous or
the snowy plover from Cascadia might. (42-43)

So we are called to witness and to action, through love and imagination, because not only humans but other-than-human beings are “endangered,” our names are “on the list.” The poem ends with this grim, beautiful injunction: “if you don’t survive this way there are others, / . . . send the report with your body—” (43).

“Years of not getting enough sleep; / awake at 5 to worry about the planet,” Hillman writes in *Seasonal Works* (“Between the Fire and the Flood,” 35), in lines that capture the anxiety and anguish that pervade much of the book. The book casts a wide net. Teaching *The Aeneid* “for the twelfth time” leads Hillman to think of

Ceaseless Empire Trojan Roman
Ottoman British U.S.A., treating tribal lands
like layers on a big old onion. Hard to be cheerful
at work. Fuck cheerful. Women
in Kandahar make \$2 a month; our people
tweet & sleep through the wars,
our soggy purses lie open the eyes
of the dollar bills stare up from the floor—
 (“I Heard Flame-Folder Spring Bring Red,” 17)

Unmarked drones that pour down death on wedding parties; the genetic engineering conducted by Monsanto, AstraZeneca, Novartis that seeks to control the fertility of seeds; the passage of Citizens United, giving corporations the status of persons; methane release; offshore drilling; global warming—all these receive Hillman’s attention, as well as her scorn for “candidates” with their “idiotic speeches” that “sound like *boing*. / They sound like *boing boing*. They go boing-boing, / boing-boing-boing” (“Radical Lads, Blisters & Glad Summers,” 91).

Several things save the book from a tone of complete despair. One is Hillman’s irrepressible formal playfulness, her quirkiness and originality. Another is humor, however dark—as in the “boing boing” lines quoted above, or “Moaning Action at the Gas Pump,” or “The Seeds Talk Back to Monsanto.” Another is the gathering hopefulness engendered by the Occupy Movement, in which Hillman took an active part, and which is the subject of several poems in the latter half of the book: “The revolution is not far away,” she writes. “It is / in your heart” (Mists from People as They Pass” (80). Then too, Hillman’s long practice of trance work has given her an unshakeable sense of spiritual realities; this is the “unknowable flame” that plays around “each word you’re reading” and grounds both her activism and her poetry. And finally, there is simple human love.

Deep in the night
a trough of chaos forms;
your lover’s body stops it every time. (“In the Evening of the Search,” 105)

Major Jackson has called *Extra Hidden Life* “perhaps [Hillman’s] most radical poetry collection yet”; in his words it is “full of celebrations of those who keep fighting the good fight, or ... devoted their lives to resisting” (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/brenda-hillman>). Rosa Luxemburg and Rosa Parks are presiding spirits in this book, and a third, everywhere throughout, is lichen, the combined fungus and alga or bacteria that breaks down stone, which Hillman calls “my wife of decomposers,” for “Lichen says / accept what is then break it down” (“Day 3,” “Metaphor & Simile. 24 journal poems at year’s end,” p. 58). Among the sources of anguish and unrest that Hillman addresses in this book are America’s economic distress, deforestation, homelessness, racism, debt and the greed of banks, gun violence and murdered children, fracking, Monsanto and WalMart, toxic seas, threatened corals, waste, a vacillating state, and—in “Hearing La Bohème After the March”—“Simpering and thug idiocies” (49). It is no wonder that the words “suffering,” “grief,” and “tired” recur in many of the poems, for this is a book written in struggle. Two of the sequences are elegies: “The Rosewood Clauses” and “Her Presence Will Live Beyond Progress.” The first elegizes Hillman’s father, who lived a long and happy life, and the second commemorates her beloved friend C. D. Wright, whose sudden death in 2016 brought an “impossible sorrow” (123). “I cling to her like a burr on a sock,” Hillman writes, “cling to her like a lipstick stain / cling like lichen on the live oak breaking things down” (129). But it would be impossible in a short space adequately to describe the overall complexity of this book, for the poems, particularly the series of “24 journal poems at year’s end” titled “Metaphor and Simile,” move quickly as thought moves from one figure or issue to another, and accrue power to reveal a nearly overwhelming sense of general suffering, injustice, and catastrophe. These lines, from “Day 4,” may serve as an example:

It’s impossible to know

how to live: Rilke paralyzed, depressed
wrote little during WWI. Claude McKay, Jamaican
songs in dialect. In letters, Roza writes:
my gold . . . The workers strike. The tsar's children had
diamonds sewn into their clothes.

Walmart
doing violence to the poor who work & shop
at Walmart how now brown cow
they cannot live. Dream baby. Crowds were
in the streets
again in groups. We had a brief
window to join in: black + brown + white . . . (60)

Still, there are moments of happiness, even joy, in *Extra Hidden Life*. The “wife of decomposers,” lichen, provides a metaphor for patience; all rock may be broken down at last, and a “radical hope lives on in us” (“Hearing La Bohème After the March” 49). In some form or another, the natural world endures; as Hillman writes, “it’s too late for countries / but it’s not too late for trees” (“Angrily Standing Outside in the Wind,” 19). Rich in love—a word that occurs often—the poems celebrate students, fellow activists, friends, and most of all, poetry and the spirits that bring poetry, earth and its airs and waters, and the poet’s human family. The book ends with two odes, “Poem for a National Forest” and “Poem for a National Seashore,” for two of the most beautiful places in California, Muir Woods and Point Reyes National Seashore, and I will end by quoting the final lines of the last poem in the book, which describes a scattering of ashes:

Talking about events that mattered as the ashes were
sucked back in the tide so loss could be lost
for a while as love kept them
in company beside— (168)

Craig Santos Perez teaches creative writing, Pacific literature, and ecopoetry at the University of Hawai'i, Manoa, and is married to a Hawai'ian woman, Brandy Nālani McDougall. An indigenous Chamorro, he was born on Guam, where he lived until the age of fifteen. His MFA is from the University of San Francisco, and his Ph.D. in Comparative Ethnic Studies is from the University of California, Berkeley. He is the author of five books of poetry and a forthcoming critical book, *Navigating CHamoru Poetry: Indigeneity, Aesthetics, and Decolonization*; coeditor of five anthologies; and co-founder of Alta Press, dedicated solely to Pacific literature. His work has received the Pen Center USA/Poetry Society of America Literary Prize, the American Book Award, the Lannan Foundation Literary Fellowship, the Hawai'i Literary Arts Council Award for an Established Artist, and a gold medal Nautilus Book Award. In 2010, the Guam Legislature passed Resolution No. 315-30, recognizing and commending Craig as an accomplished poet and ambassador for Guam, "eloquently conveying through his words, the beauty and love that is the Chamorro culture" (<http://craigsantosperez.com/>)

Because Santos Perez's most recent book, *Habitat Threshold* (2020), is such a departure from the earlier series, I will briefly mention it here. It is set in Hawai'i, but its ecocritical focus casts an international net. Much more direct than his previous books, its power lies in his anxiety, rage, and wit. "There's no half-life of sorrow when our children / inherit this toxic legacy" (65), he writes, about the environmental crisis that has become our world. And still, somehow, there is tenderness. "I love you without knowing how or when this world / will end" (26), he writes in a poem for his wife, which seems also to speak to his daughter, to the creatures, to us all.

The four brilliant books by Craig Santos Perez that comprise "*from* unincorporated territory" are [hacha], [saina], [guma'], and [lukao], from 2008, 2010, 2014, and 2017. They all trace back to a single story which his mother tells in a memoir and which he quotes in "*from* unincorporated territory [guma']."

One day in our geography class [in Virginia], my teacher taped several maps on the wall and asked each of us to stand in front of the class and mark where our parents and grandparents were born. I tried to remember everything my mom told me about Guam. I only remembered that she told me it would be hard to find on a map . . . because it was so small. She said it's in the Pacific Ocean, and it's a tiny dot on the map, so find the Philippine Islands first because it's not far from there. . . I knelt down so I could see better and found the Philippine Islands. I still couldn't find Guam and I started crying. . . I looked at my teacher and said, "Please help me find Guam. (17-18)

Santos Perez makes Guam visible. Highly experimental, his books combine lyric poetry with documentation, making use of maps, lists, strike-throughs, italicized passages, passages in faint gray ink, code-switching between English and Chamorro and sometimes Spanish. The four books of "*from* Unincorporated Territory" speak to each other and continually complicate his narrative. The titles' beginning with "*from*" indicates that in both poetry and history, Guam's story is unfinished. Because of this complexity, they are richly rewarding but hard to describe. As Michael Lujan Bevacqua writes,

Through his poetry, he weaves together different languages, citations, and spatial configurations in order to challenge old maps and to retrace the steps of Chamorros through their ancient past and challenge the ways in which key points on that journey have come to be represented, remembered, or forgotten. In challenging colonialist, Eurocentric maps, he is also in essence creating new song maps meant to lead Chamorros in new directions in terms of their consciousness and their identity. His work represents a poetic and a political decolonization, whereby the sites that once constricted and constrained us can now help us imagine our liberation. ("The Song Maps of Craig Santos Perez," *Transmotion*, Vol. I, No. I, 2015.)

"*from* Unincorporated Territory [hacha]" lays out the geographic and the poetic territory. It describes Guam; "approx. 209 square miles," it is the "southernmost island in the Marianas archipelago," the peak of a "submerged mountain. . . rising 37,820 feet above the floor of the [Marianas] trench" (7-8). Unincorporated, "an area under U. S. jurisdiction in which only certain 'natural' protections of the U. S. Constitution apply," it is "organized"; "the 1950 Guam Organic

"*from* Unincorporated Territory [saina]" continues the exploration of Chamorro history. One important series of poems concerns the sakman, the outrigger canoe "once numerous in waters of the marianas islands," and "the fastest sailing vessels in the world," but systematically destroyed by the Spanish; by the mid-nineteenth century, the knowledge of how to build and sail the sakman had been lost. Then in the 1990's an organization called "tasi" ("traditions about seafaring islands") built a sakman, named it "'saina' : 'parents elders spirits ancestors,'" and blessed and first sailed it in September 2008 (15). This act of cultural retrieval is countered by poems concerning the proliferation of military dumping, nuclear testing, and other military toxic waste that have polluted Pacific waters since World War II (60); and poems concerning the U.S. military appropriation of land and personnel buildup in Guam. Some of these poems constitute an interspersed series, "ginen tidelands," in which all the text is struck through as if to imitate the official suppression of its knowledge. In 2010, the U.S. military "occupies a third of the island" (67), and a build-up has continued since then. The tourist industry, too, brings crowding, destruction of traditional sites, various sorts of environmental damage. Elderly Chamorus are dying of disease and younger Chamorus are disproportionately joining the military and dying in American wars; "in the current war on terror, our killed in action rate is now five times the national average" (127).

The third book of the series, "[guma]," introduces "the legends of juan malo"— "a young poor Chamorro man" whose adventures involved tricking the Spanish during colonial occupation and who becomes an alter ego for Santos Perez in his "spirit of resistance" (n.p.) There are poems about Spam, the canned meat introduced by the American military, and—in contrast—poems about latte, stone pillars dating from as early as 900 AD that "formed the foundations of homes, schools, canoe shelters, food sheds, and communal spaces" (18) and that symbolize Chamorro strength. Movingly, lists of the dead killed in U.S. military action run throughout the book, with all details except their names struck through. And a series of "*ginen* fatal impact statements" register opposition during a public comment period to the continued military buildup on the island, with the proposed transfer of thousands of Marines from Okinawa.

"*from* unincorporated territory [lukao]" foregrounds several kinds of birth. It begins, "Guam was born on March 6, 1521, when Ferdinand Magellan arrived in . . . Hamatack Bay and delivered [us] into the calloused hands of modernity" (11). Poems titled "*ginen* island of no birdsong" thread their way throughout, about various endangered or extinct species; these include the micronesian kingfisher and the marianas crow, both now extinct in the wild, extirpated by the brown tree snakes that now number in the millions; the only births of these birds take place in captivity.

Other births are happier. The book has four sections, each divided into five groups of poems: "*from* the legends of juan malo [a malalogue]," "*ginen* understory," "*ginen* organic acts," "*ginen* Ka Lāhui o ka Pō Interview," and "*ginen* island of no birdsong." Throughout the poems of "*ginen* understory", Santos Perez awaits, then begins to parent, his first child, whom he calls [neni]—in English, baby or sweetheart. The phrase "*ginen* Ka Lāhui o ka Pō Interview" refers to traditional Chamorro birthing practices, and juxtaposes his wife's accounts of [neni's] birth with his mother's accounts of the births of her own three children. But as always, the political dimensions of American occupation are manifest; a series of lined-through prose paragraphs narrates the U.S. Navy medical officers' gradual shutting down of Chamorro midwives.

In Chamorro, "lukao" means "procession," especially a religious procession, and a series of prayers runs through the book: his elderly Catholic grandmother's recitations of the rosary as she near the end of her life; his own invocations of saints, as in "St. Sebastian, tayuyute [ham] (12); the possibly ironic lists of #prayfor_____ with which he ends each of the book's sections; his prayers to *puntan* and *fu'una*, the Chamorro gods of creation, and to *haumea*, the Hawai'ian goddess of fertility (35), to protect his wife in her pregnancy and then their newborn daughter; and his constant remembrance of "i taotaomo'na *the spirits of before*" (35). A beautiful example of this ends the poem "(first birthday)", and it may serve as a blessing to end this essay:

... [neni], no matter how far from home

the storms take you, remember to carry our words
in your canoe // [neni], remember: you will always

belong, you will always be sheltered, and you
will always be sacred in our ocean of stories (65)

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