An interview with CHamoru poet and scholar Craig Santos Perez

http://craigsantosperez.com/

with three poems from the collection *Habitat Threshold* (2020)
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Craig Santos Perez was born on the island of Guåhan (Guam) and currently lives in Honolulu, Hawai`i. He is a Professor in the English Department at the University of Hawai‘i, Mānoa, where he teaches creative writing, eco-poetry, and Pacific literature, and he is also an award-winning poet who has published spoken word poetry albums and several books of poetry. His latest book, entitled *Navigating CHamoru Poetry: Indigeneity, Aesthetics, and Decolonization* (University of Arizona Press, 2021), won the MLA Prize for Studies in Native American Literatures, Cultures, and Languages in 2022. His latest poetry book, *Habitat Threshold* (2020), is being translated into French and will be published shortly by Editions Bruno Doucey.

This interview was made by email correspondence in March 2023. Questions were submitted to Mr. Perez who very kindly elaborated upon them. His answers were compiled in the following text. The final version of the text was previewed and approved by him. He also accepted to submit three poems of his 2020 book *Habitat Threshold* (Omnidawn Publishing, Oakland, CA), placed here as a testimony of his poetic art and their relevance to the issues discussed in the interview.

The editors express their deepest gratitude to Mr. Perez and wholeheartedly thank him for his kindness, sincerity, and the power of his words, ideas, and poetry.

Age of Plastic[1]

The doctor presses the plastic probe
against my pregnant wife's belly.
Plastic leaches estrogenic and toxic chemicals.
Ultrasound waves pulse between plastic,
tissue, fluid, and bone until the embryo
echoes. *Plastic makes this possible.* My wife
labors at home in an inflatable plastic tub.
Plastic disrupts hormonal and endocrine systems.
After delivery, she stores her placenta
in a plastic freezer bag. *Plastic is the perfect*
creation because it never dies. Our daughter
sucks on a plastic pacifier. *Whales,*
plankton, shrimp, and birds confuse plastic
for food. The plastic pump whirrs;
breastmilk drips into a plastic bottle.
Plastic keeps food, water, and medicine fresh––
yet how empty plastic must feel
to be birthed, used, then disposed
by us: degrading creators. *In the oceans,*
one ton of plastic exists for every three tons
of fish––how free plastic must feel
when it finally arrives to the paradise
of the Pacific gyre. W*ill plastic make*
life impossible? Our daughter falls
asleep in a plastic crib, and I dream
that she's composed of plastic,
so that she, too, will survive
our wasteful hands.

[1] From *Habitat Threshold* © 2020 Craig Santos Perez, p.11. The poem appears with the permission of Omnidawn Publishing. All rights reserved. « Age of Plastic » is the first poem in the collection. It is reproduced here exactly as presented in the book. We have not, however, retained a quotation about plastic from Roland Barthes's *Mythologies* (1957) which appeared opposite the poem in the original work.

This notion of "Indigenous Lights" is meant to foreground Indigenous thought and intellectual achievements. What do you think of it and how could it be applied to Pacific cultures and poetry?

I think it is a beautiful and profound idea. The first thing it reminds me are stars. In many Pacific cultures, stars were used to help navigators find their way across archipelagic and vast oceanic spaces. They learned the patterns and movement of the stars, and they could read the stars to wayfind their origin and destination islands. The stars formed a kind of map, a celestial cartography of ancient light. We often talk about our ancestors, our master navigators, and other practitioners as stars because they help guide us to navigate our lives and to find our way within our cultures.

When I wrote that navigators could "read" the stars, I used that word intentionally. We also think of our poets as stars that guide us across the vast distances of silence and forgetting. These poets, along with their oral and written texts, shine like bright constellations of stories.

How have Indigenous Pacific researchers and artists defined the Indigenous perspectives and guidance that matter to face today's greatest challenges?

Pacific Islander researchers have played a crucial role in unearthing and revitalizing indigenous knowledge, cultural customs, and practices after centuries of these perspectives being suppressed and replaced by colonialism. These researchers are sometimes academics with graduate degrees or they are cultural practitioners who have maintained traditions passed down through the generations.

Pacific artists have also played an important role in expressing, articulating, and circulating knowledge through creative media. Our cultural creations range from visual art, literature, dance, theatre, performance, film, music, fashion, and more. What they all have in common is that their work embodies indigenous knowledge and explores how this wisdom can inform how we encounter the past, experience the present, and imagine the future.

While all cultures across the Pacific have distinct differences, they also have much in common. An Indigenous Pacific perspective could be described as seeing the world as a kinship network, in which humans, animals, and the environment are all interconnected. Moreover, Pacific cultures teach us that we are genealogically related to the earth, and thus we should live in harmony with nature (one might describe this as an environmental ethics of care and respect). This perspective can serve as guidance for approaching today's greatest challenges, especially climate change.

How can poetry and research impact people's perception of climate change?

Research can help people understand the complexities, causes, and dangers of climate change. There are many Pacific researchers who are doing important scientific research on how climate change is impacting our islands, such as sea level rise, ocean acidification, coral bleaching, extreme storms and drought, record temperatures, and changing weather patterns, to name a few. Additionally, researchers can help us articulate solutions and sustainable ways to mitigate the impacts of climate change.

While research and science can provide us with data, information, graphs, and dates, poetry (and storytelling in general), can help us perceive climate change from a more human and emotional perspective. Poetry is often grounded in the personal experiences of the author, so poetry written by Pacific Islanders can show us how it feels to live on islands that are changing due to climate change. They can highlight the human stories of survival and triumph of small communities who live on small islands and whose voices are often not heard in the centers of global power. In this sense, poetry can both empower Pacific Islanders to speak and it can inspire empathy from a global audience.

Can you speak about how your book, *Habitat Threshold* (2020), explores the themes of climate change and environmental justice?

My book, *Habitat Threshold*, is a collection of "eco-poetry," which I define broadly as poetry about nature, wilderness, ecology, environmental justice, climate change, and animals. I first started writing the book in 2014—the year my first daughter was born and the year the United Nations Climate Summit[2] was held in New York City. Being a new father and becoming aware of climate change caused me a deep sense of anxiety and dread. Writing this book gave me a space to reckon with these emotions and to tell a story about how climate change was impacting the Pacific at large and my current home of Hawai'i. Beyond climate change, I also explore themes of plastic pollution, oceans, nuclearism, the refugee crisis, water struggles, human-animal relations, the sixth mass extinction, and more. Many of the poems include my daughter and intimate family scenes to illustrate how larger phenomena can shape domestic experiences, as well as how the local is intimately entangled with the global.

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[2] One of the closing remarks at the summit by Ban Ki-moon, Secretary General of the UN was: « [L]et us look back on today as the day we decided—as a human family—to put our house in order to make it liveable for future generations. ». Nations Unies, 2014, https://press.un.org/en/2014/sgsm16190.doc.htm.

Rings of Fire[3]
Honolulu, Hawai'i

We host our daughter's first birthday party
during the hottest April in history.

Outside, my dad grills meat over charcoal;
inside, my mom steams rice and roasts

vegetables. They've traveled from California,
where drought carves trees into tinder––"Paradise

is burning." When our daughter's first fever spiked,
the doctor said, "It's a sign she's fighting infection."

Bloodshed surges with global temperatures,
which know no borders. "If her fever doesn't break,"

the doctor continued, "take her to the Emergency
Room." Airstrikes detonate hospitals

in Yemen, Iraq, Afghanistan, South Sudan…
"When she crowned," my wife said, "it felt like rings

of fire." Volcanoes erupt along Pacific fault lines;
sweltering heatwaves scorch Australia;

forests in Indonesia are razed for palm oil plantations––
their ashes flock, like ghost birds, to our distant

rib cages. Still, I crave an unfiltered cigarette,
even though I quit years ago, and my breath

no longer smells like my grandpa's overflowing ashtray––
his parched cough still punctures the black lungs

of cancer and denial. "If she struggles to breathe,"
the doctor advised, "Give her an asthma inhaler."

But tonight we sing, "Happy Birthday," and blow
out the candles together. Smoke trembles

as if we all exhaled
the same flammable wish.

[3] From *Habitat Threshold* © 2020 Craig Santos Perez, p.16. The poem appears with the permission of Omnidawn Publishing. All rights reserved.

How have you and other artists and researchers made sense of the ongoing attempts at getting rid of colonial structures and at replacing them by ones more adequate to the well-being of Pacific populations?

Pacific researchers and artists have and continue to decolonize history, culture, art, and literature. This is common not only in the Pacific but around the world as formerly colonized countries gained their independence and sought to revitalize indigenous traditions, languages, and customs. Decolonization is not a destination, though, it is an ongoing journey. We need researchers to teach us what our cultures were like before colonialism, what was lost because of colonialism, and how we might indigenize colonial technologies, institutions, and structures. Additionally, artists can help us imagine new worlds beyond colonialism and capitalism. They can decolonize our imaginations so that we are empowered to get rid of colonial structures and replace them with ones that will prioritize the health of Pacific populations.

What role do emotions have in your work and the kind of perception that may help Humans deal with what the economic and imperial system is doing to the planet?

Throughout my poetry, I try to delve deep into emotions, whether those emotions are positive (joy, love, family, care) or negative (violence, hate, death, toxicity). These emotions are often embodied in personal memories and experiences, or they are expressed through my own feeling about larger issues (war, migration, capitalism). Either way, I hope that when a reader engages with my poetry, they will also consider how they feel about these topics, and perhaps they too will consider making changes in their behavior or ethical beliefs. In this way, poetry can be a creative path towards empathy and change.

Can you talk about your creative approach and the issues you are exploring right now, or the questions you are asking?

My creative approach is straightforward. I write in my journal what I am thinking or feeling that day. Sometimes it is a personal topic and sometimes it is a political issue. I will just allow myself to write without editing or being critical. After letting those emotions of my journaling settle, I will return to it a few days later to start crafting a poem, looking for images, symbols, scenes, or narrative plot points. I will continue drafting the poem in my journal until it feels structured and organized enough to type. After that, I continue to edit until every word and syllable heightens the meaning of the poem.

Right now, I am working on a follow-up to *Habitat Threshold* which contains poems that I have written since 2020. This collection will be titled *Pandemic Threshold*, and its focus is on my experience during the coronavirus pandemic, which caused me another wave of anxiety

and dread alongside climate change and parenthood. The poems also have an environmental focus since I try to connect the environment to the spread of disease and to our own human health. Everything, as Pacific cultures teach us, is interconnected.

The Last Safe Habitat[4]

I don't want our daughter to know
that Hawai'i is the bird extinction capitol
of the world. I don't want her to walk
around the island feeling haunted
by tree roots buried under concrete.
I don't want her to fear the invasive
predators who slither, pounce,
bite, swallow, disease, and multiply.
I don't want her to see the paintings
and photographs of birds she'll never
witness in the wild. I don't want her to
imagine their bones in dark museum
drawers. I don't want her to hear
birdsong recordings on the internet.
I don't want her to memorize and recite
the names of 77 lost species and subspecies.
I don't want her to draw a timeline
with the years each was "first collected"
and "last sighted." I don't want her to learn

[4] From *Habitat Threshold* © 2020 Craig Santos Perez, p. 46. The poem appears with the permission of Omnidawn Publishing. All rights reserved. « The Last Safe Habitat » appears at the end of Part 2 of the collection. We have not retained a quotation about the extinction of a species from Thom Van Doren's text, *Flight Ways : Life and Loss at the Edge of Extinction* (2014), which appeared opposite the poem in the original work.

about the ʻŌʻō, who was observed atop
a flowering ʻŌhiʻa tree, calling for a mate,
day after day, season after season,
He didn't know he was the last of his kind,
or maybe he did, and that's why, one day,
he disappeared, forever, into a nest
of avian silence. I don't want our daughter
to calculate how many miles of fencing
is needed to protect the endangered birds
that remain. I don't want her to realize
the most serious causes of extinction
can't be fenced out. I want to convince
her that extinction is not the end. I want
to convince her that extinction is just
a migration to the last safe habitat
on earth. I want to convince her
that our winged relatives have arrived
safely to their destination: a wondrous
island with a climate we can never
change, and a rainforest fertile
with seeds and song.

Thank you very much, Craig Santos Perez, for accepting our invitation and answering our questions. We wish you every success for your next projects!