

PRISM REVIEW CONTEMPORARY INTERVIEW

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CRAIG SANTOS PEREZ

We're based in Southern California. Craig Santos Perez was, until recently, based in Northern California. Naturally we met in Manhattan, where in spring 2010 we spent a few days with Craig, watching him eat marrow on toast and giving one of the most enthusiastic poetry readings we've seen. His first book [hacha] was already long out and his second, [saina], was set to pop, and he was so young, so friendly, we so were jealous. Both books are part of his fascinating on-going project from *unincorporated territory*, which considers an aspect of 'American' culture entirely overlooked: the colonization of Guam. Beyond the subject matter, the books are a uniquely intelligent mix of texts and lyricism and form that has garnered Craig very well-deserved praise. In the course of this interview (done over several weeks in spring 2011), he was nominated for the 2010 *Los Angeles Times* Award in Poetry – we'll have gone to press by the time the winner's announced, but obviously, we're pulling for him. That at his age he's in a category with Henri Cole and Maxine Kumin is terribly impressive. That he takes it all with a smile and shrug is even more-so.

*Let's alienate our readers with a few boring questions. Could you tell us about how you came to be a writer of poetry? Early influences, inclinations, experiments, etc?*

I grew up in the Pacific Island of Guahan (Guam), in a small village named Mongmong. There were power outages every day, so I couldn't always play Nintendo or watch *Saved By the Bell* (colonialism giveth and colonialism taketh away). I began writing comic strips – as a kid I loved *Berenstein Bears*, *Garfield*, and *Calvin & Hobbes*. Those books were like my Shakespeare, my Bible, and my Brothers Grimm; in short, they taught me everything about Western literature that I needed to know.

I started writing poetry after my family migrated to the States (California). I was a sophomore in high school when we moved, and my first English teacher in America, James Kass (who I recently learned became a spoken word super star), gave us the lyrics to Simon and Garfunkel's "Mrs. Robinson." This changed my life. In my junior year, my teacher Kami Tomberlain introduced me to the work of Toni Morrison and John Irving, and I loved writing about literature. And my life changed more. In my senior year, my honors English teacher Thomas Seaton introduced me to the work of Robert Hass, Jack Gilbert, and Jane Hirschfield. Eight years later, Thomas Seaton and I were classmates in the same MFA program (he's an amazing poet)! Is that Irony or Destiny?

Every poem I wrote during high school was written to improve my chances of getting laid in this new, exotic continent called America. When I wasn't writing, I would cruise to the Half Price Bookstore in Fremont, CA. Probably half my current poetry library came from that one store.

*Just to be clear, we didn't have Nintendo either. We had bubble gum cards with which we invented complex scoring games using dice and sheets and sheets of invented statistics. But our early stories were about dueling knights and the New Kids on the Block. How did you come to first write poetry about Guam?*

Well, to be honest, I try not to write "about" Guam. For me, it's more about writing Guam, writing culture, writing my family, etc. To me, Guam doesn't have an absolute aboutness. Guahan is a moving island, a moving signifier, always being revised, articulated, unwoven, woven, whispered, silenced, deconstructed, constructed, forgotten and remembered. I want to write that process, to be involved in its unfolding storying, to be one author among many, in its authority.

So symbolically, I've always been writing Guahan. In terms of Guamizing poetic content, that began as an undergraduate at the University of Redlands. In fact, the first poem I wrote that ever got published was called "The Lust of Emperors" and it was one story of

my father's experience as a Chamorro in the Vietnam War. The title was awful, I know, but the poem wasn't too shabby, imho.

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*Could you tell us what you know about the Chamorro lifestyle pre-occupation?*

Thankfully, there are many books on “Ancient Chamorro Society”; ironically, most of the archival material these books draw from are notebooks from the colonizers themselves—kind of like anthropological logbooks. As a matter of fact, the archival image of the canoe on the cover of [saina] is a drawing from one of these colonial notebooks. In essence, Chamorros today wouldn't know what these canoes looked like or wouldn't know as much about our ancestors if the colonizers didn't find it important to document the culture they were destroying.

*The American presence on the island is so pervasive – it's fascinating that it has 'helped' to preserve a way of life it's alternately destroying. We imagine you must have at some point become acquainted with members of the occupation. How have you negotiated the personal with the political?*

Guam has the highest rate of military recruitment per capita than any other U.S. state or territory. For many Chamorro activists, their political beliefs often tear families apart and divide the community. Others are simply afraid to speak out in fear of offending their family members, especially difficult for families who have lost loved ones in U.S. wars.

Every Chamorro family on Guam has a family member who has served or currently serves or has died in the U.S. military. My father and my godfather are veterans of the Vietnam War. So are some of my uncles. I have two grandfathers and two great-grandfathers who served in the U.S. military. I have several cousins and friends currently in the military. I almost joined the Army when I was a senior in high school. I laugh at that now, but I know I still have to be very careful around militarized Chamorros. I just try to be respectful, understanding, and honest.

What is happening more and more nowadays is that Chamorros in the military are speaking out against the U.S. military. Sounds paradoxical, but these Chamorros believe that they have sacrificed for their colonizer and have proved themselves to be loyal and willing citizens of the U.S., so they don't understand why the U.S. continues to treat Guam and Chamorros like colonized people.

*Formally, [hacha] and [saina] seem very Modernist in their appropriation of other texts and willingness to fragment an otherwise fairly clear content. Could you talk about how you arrived at presenting these texts in this way – not only the process of putting [hacha] and [saina] together, but also other texts that influenced your presentational thinking (if any)?*

Damn you're smart! Yes, from *unincorporated territory* formed through my study of modernism, the long poem, and theories of the Book; for example, Pound's Cantos, Williams' Paterson, H.D.'s Trilogy, Zukofsky's "A," and Olson's Maximus. I loved how these writers were exploring a theme/subject over a long period of time and through many different forms. I hoped to attain this same kind of breadth and depth of vision and voice in my own work. One difference between my project and other long poems is that my long poem will always contain the "from," always eluding the closure of completion.

I also became intrigued by how some poets were writing trans-book poems: such as Duncan's "Passages" and Mackey's "Songs of the

Andoumboulou.” I employ this kind of trans-book threading in my own work as poems change and continue across books (for example, excerpts from the poems “*from tidelands*” and “*from aerial roots*” appear in both my first and second books). These threaded poems differ from Duncan and Mackey’s work because I resist the linearity of numbering that their work sometimes employs.

*Even though you’re resisting that linearity, [saina] often reads like a narrative with elements of genuine suspense (the testimony at the UN, your grandmother’s illness). Is this tension intentional?*

I am playing with the idea that poetry can have both “narrative absorption” and “narrative fragmentation.” Many experimental poets reject absorption for various reasons; I like absorption because it demands an emotional and personal commitment. However, I also think fragmentation is important to fully embody certain elements of a given story—especially when that story involves violent, colonial disruptions.

*The two books’ fragmentation – the use of excerpts from “from tidelands” and “from aerial roots” in both – almost asks the reader to sift through the texts, to piece the sections together. Do you hope readers do this?*

I’m always intrigued by the often unique mappings that readers will develop throughout their journeys. I know some readers who have read the entire book from cover to cover, then they go back and read one strand/current at a time (so, they’d read all of “*from tidelands*” all at once, etc). I think that navigational strategy is really effective because then you experience both fragmentation and reconstruction.

*Both books are part of the ongoing from unincorporated territory project. What concerns, hesitations, hopes do you have in being monogamous to a single subject?*

One of the opening epigraphs in *[hacha]* is from the Gospel of John and references the Miracle of the Loaves and Fishes. After all are fed, Jesus sends his disciples to gather up the fragments, or the crumbs, from the 5 loaves and two fish that just fed the multitude. They ended up filling twelve whole baskets with the fragments.

If you are from the “fourth world” (the world of colonies), this miracle happens almost every day as Pacific Islanders manage to feed whole families with one can of SPAM or one can of corned beef and some rice. And there’s somehow always leftovers, despite our Oceanic appetites. So *from unincorporated territory* is going to be 12 baskets filled with the fragments of my people’s culture, history, language, knowledge, and stories. And by 12 baskets, I mean for “a 1,000 years,” and by that I mean that I will continue writing this project until Guahan is an independent nation liberated from the tyranny of U.S. colonialism. Unfortunately, that may be my whole life.

Writing Guahan can take many different forms and is endlessly stimulating and important to me. One of the joys of this form is that you don’t have to say everything all at once. I can reveal new details about stories I’ve told in past books, I can tell a story in a completely different form in subsequent books, I can reference my past stories in new poems (creating an interesting web of signification). I think this will also reward the reader because they can also make connections over time and become emotionally involved with the characters, the landscapes, the history, and the culture.

And it’s easy to be monogamous when your partner is thoroughly satisfying and damn sexy.

*Both [hacha] and [saina] feel far more anchored in the real world than much contemporary poetry. A key reason is that they’re so explicitly steeped in traditions of non-fiction – though we dislike the word, they seem like a true hybrid. Yet you’re a poet. You publish poetry. The books are books of poetry, published by poetry presses. Why are these poetry, not non-fiction? How do you distinguish between the two?*

To me, journalism can elegantly and concisely report events, memoir captures personal emotions, interviews render voice, history summarizes time. I love fiction too because it can present the complexities of narrative and imagine situations and characters to show the possibilities of human existence.

Poetry's strength, to me, is its ability to interweave the strengths of non-fiction and fiction; plus, poetry can be both non-fictional and fictional. In terms of form, poetry can interweave verse and prose (as I do in my own work), exploring the medium of written language. In my mind, poetry is like film in the sense that film can interweave photography (image) and music (sound).

*We just read Jonathan Franzen's Freedom, and its simplicity (especially in comparison to some of his other works) has us suspecting that he's intentionally writing 'below' his ability in order to reach a wider audience. And the whole idea of audience is tricky for us: sometimes we want to be self-indulgent, aloof. Sometimes we want to entertain or to move our readers. Other times we're interested, vainly, in affecting social change. There's a similar tension in your works – your project is clearly focused on a social issue, yet [hacha] and [saina] are complex to the point that 'lay' readers might be intimidated. How do you balance the personal need for artistic complexity with a project goal that relies on a larger audience?*

Speaking of *Freedom*, what's up with all the birds appearing on book covers recently? And I wouldn't doubt if that were the case, especially if a wider audience (and more royalties) will lead to the financial freedom (perhaps the true meaning of Franzen's title) necessary to pursue a pure path of self-indulgence and aloofness—the ultimate goal of all Great American Writers.

Yeah, it's tricky for me too because I want my readers to have a full experience: to laugh and cry, learn and rage, think and scoff, meditate and be transformed. To do all these things requires a complexity that intimidates many—even non-lay readers, even myself! The way I reconcile with this is that I always keep in mind how “audience”

doesn't just mean those who are alive now, but also a future audience. The poetry that lives on after the Death of the Author and the Death of the (contemporaneous) Audience—after the Death of Oprah even (if we can even imagine such a literary world)—is the poetry that is the most complex and dynamic. I am also working on a novel (hopefully there will be a bird on the cover) that I believe will sell a million copies—did I mention that my mom is a millionaire?

*Per our contractual agreement, here's your time to self-promote: when is your next book coming out?*

I hope you and your readers will friend me on Facebook or follow my blog so that you can know when the books are published. The next one will be published by Omnidawn Publishing (my current publisher) in 2012/13.

*Will do. But maybe if we could see you now, without help from the interwebs – please, help us picture Craig Santos Perez en composicion.*

At the moment, Craig Santos Perez does much of his writing in a sexy loincloth, his hard body lathered in coconut oil, drinking green tea, with Pandora Radio playing on his iPad (usually “Estelle” radio), while he works with his source materials. When he tires of this, he will take his moleskin journal to the beach, which is a five minute walk from his apartment in Kailua, a small beach town on the windward side of Oahu, Hawaii. He tries to ignore the sunburned tourists in bikinis, the military personnel in their board shorts and American flag tats, and the occasional European tourists chain smoking in the sand. He finds his little spot: a small shelf of sand just above the shore. He listens to the waves for a few minutes before he opens his journal, clicks his mechanical pencil, and...

*Wait? What? That's your life?! Young writers reading this will jump at the chance to be poets.*

Oh great, they're going to envy me even more for doing my writing on the beach and they're gonna hate me and never buy my books. Thanks for nothing, *Prism Review!*

*Well, redeem yourself: what advice would you give them – especially more 'ordinary' Americans searching for their own subject matter?*

First, I think any American who becomes a creative writer is not at all ordinary. Fox News has proven beyond any unreasonable doubt that ordinary Americans are completely idiotic and illiterate. If you are a young writer and reading this long-ass interview, then you are very very special. And you have a responsibility to the health of your culture (the Hawaiians call this *kuleana*) to write with passion, commitment, and fearlessness. Don't be afraid to write about the small things, the everydayness, the passing moment, the fleeting thought, the surprising emotion. Write about sex and love and food and pets and friends and the gym and restaurants and gas stations and the streets. And Culture and History and Society and Politics and the Environment and your Ancestors and Death and Nothing and Language and Philosophy and Science. And try different styles and techniques and forms (no one is gonna sleep with you if you wear the same clothes everyday). Yes, poems will help you get laid, so share your work any chance you get because you ain't going to be young forever!