Off-Island CHamorus

My family migrated to California when I was 15 years old. During the first day at my new high school, the homeroom teacher asked: “Where are you from?” “The Mariana Islands,” I answered. He replied: “I’ve never heard of that place. Prove it exists.” And when I stepped in front of the world map on the wall, it transformed into a mirror: the Pacific Ocean, like my body, was split in two and flayed to the margins. I found Australia, then the Philippines, then Japan. I pointed to an empty space between them and said: “I’m from this invisible archipelago.” Everyone laughed. And even though I descend from oceanic navigators, I felt so lost, shipwrecked on the coast of a strange continent. “Are you a citizen?” he probed. “Yes. My island, Guam, is a U.S. territory.”

We attend American schools, eat American food, listen to American music, watch American movies and television, play American sports, learn American history, dream American dreams, and die in American wars. “You speak English well,” he proclaimed, “with almost no accent.” And isn’t that what it means to be a diasporic CHamoru: to feel foreign in a domestic sense.

Over the last 50 years, CHamorus have migrated to escape the violent memories of war; to seek jobs, schools, hospitals, adventure, and love; but most of all, we’ve migrated for military service, deployed and stationed to bases around the world. According to the 2010 census, 44,000 CHamorus live in California, 15,000 in Washington, 10,000 in Texas, 7,000 in Hawaii, and 70,000 more in every other state and even Puerto Rico. We are the most “geographically dispersed” Pacific Islander population within the United States, and off-island CHamorus now outnumber our on-island kin, with generations having been born away from our ancestral homelands, including my daughters.
Some of us will be able to return home for holidays, weddings, and funerals; others won’t be able to afford the expensive plane ticket to the Western Pacific. Years and even decades might pass between trips, and each visit will feel too short. We’ll lose contact with family and friends, and the island will continue to change until it becomes unfamiliar to us. And isn’t that, too, what it means to be a diasporic CHamoru: to feel foreign in your own homeland.

Even after 25 years away, there are still times I feel adrift, without itinerary or destination. When I wonder: What if we stayed? What if we return? When the undertow of these questions begins pulling you out to sea, remember: migration flows through our blood like the aerial roots of the banyan tree. Remember: our ancestors taught us how to carry our culture in the canoes of our bodies. Remember: our people, scattered like stars, form new constellations when we gather. Remember: home is not simply a house, village, or island; home is an archipelago of belonging.

—Craig Santos Perez