

Living Nations, Living Words: A Map of First Peoples Poetry
Poem commentary by Lehua M. Taitano, 2020

Speaker: Lehua M. Taitano

Date of recording: July 19, 2020

Location: Pomo/Miwok Territory, Santa Rosa, California, poet's home

Length: 9 minutes, 11 seconds

START OF RECORDING

Lehua M. Taitano: This is Lehua M. Taitano, daughter of Catherine Taitano, granddaughter of Maria Flores Taitano, reading my poem "Current, I."

[Lehua M. Taitano reads "Current, I"]

LMT: "Current, I" is a piece I originally wrote for a digital exhibition curated by the Smithsonian Institute's Asian Pacific American Center titled "A Day in the Queer Life of Asian Pacific America." As such, the poem is a response to the question: "As a queer Pacific Islander, how are you doing?"

It seems a simple enough question, but the fact is that as a person whose sexuality is only one identity in an intersection of identities I inhabit as a CHamoru woman living in diaspora, as a visitor on others' native lands (in this case, Pomo and Miwok lands in Northern California), the question of "How am I doing?" is one that asks so much more. It's at once a question of my wellbeing, perceived and actual. It's a question of how I see my place in my community, my workplace, my family, my social groups, and in the world.

So "Current, I" calls on what I know if situating myself in a world in which the very idea of queerness is more of a social construct in Western society, where sexuality and gender expression are categories of selfhood. In the context of my own Indigenous CHamoru sensibility, however, queerness is not a category that, traditionally, our people assign to one another. Rather, we might consider how we are part of the whole, rather than displaced or apart from it.

Part of this poem references the CHamoru creation story, in which the world was created by siblings, siblings who sacrifice their bodies to create the ocean, the land, the sky, the sun and

the moon, and our people. This is a framework for our cultural worldview, and it resonates deeply with me when I consider how to situate myself in this world, where my homeland is still occupied and under colonial rule. As of today, Guåhan, or the island of Guam, as it is often referred to, is still an Unincorporated Territory of the United States, wherein our native land continues to be taken, desecrated, and destroyed by the U.S. government. The graves of our ancestors are, at this very moment, being unearthed, the land bulldozed in order for the military to create a live firing range, where U.S. soldiers will set up targets to bombard with thousands of rounds of ammunition and live ordinances. Because we as CHamorus consider ourselves descendants of those gods who created the land, sea, and sky, we are also descendants of the land, sea, and sky itself. To honor and respect the natural world, then, is to honor our ancestors, to honor ourselves and the future of our islands. As CHamorus, how do we situate ourselves in such chaos and displacement? How can one ever feel “ok” or “well” in the throes of occupation and oppression?

For me, in this poem, anyway, I try to address those questions, and ultimately rely on what I know of the interconnectedness of my humanity to my nonhuman relations, to ancestral knowledge and persistence, and to an ongoing belief that fighting for our independence as CHamorus honors the very earth itself. How am I doing? In “Current, I” I hope that I express that I am galvanized. I am connected to my culture and my community. I am WE. And we are fighting for our freedom.

END OF RECORDING