

WAYS OF BELONGING: VARYING INDIGENOUS EXPERIENCES WITH THE  
CONCEPTS OF HOME AND HOMELAND

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**Introduction**

Mainstream media has a long history of essentializing minority cultures, boiling them down to a few simple characteristics and only using those aspects in portraying them. Essentializing is incredibly harmful to minority communities because it fails to acknowledge the diversity and complexity of lived experience. Indigenous Peoples all over the world have suffered from essentializing by colonizers for centuries, including Indigenous Peoples residing in the continental US and US territories. Most settler Americans are ignorant about the variety and diversity of Indigenous Peoples that reside in the US, tending to mentally lump them all together into one conceptual group of 'Native Americans' (a term that many Indigenous Peoples in the Americas find inaccurate or offensive). Even beyond this initial ignorance, many settler Americans think of Indigenous Peoples living on the continental US when they think about this conceptual group, and rarely ever remember that there are also Indigenous Peoples in Alaska, Hawai'i, Guam, Virgin Islands, American Samoa, and other US territories. Being off-continent comes with additional obstacles for Indigenous Peoples to get their voices heard even beyond those that already exist for Indigenous Peoples on the continental US. However, these nuances are rarely acknowledged or even realized by most settler Americans, who tend to essentialize what they perceive to be a singular group of Indigenous People down to a few characteristics. These stereotypes may include that Indigenous People live on reservations, that they have a deep emotional and spiritual connection to the land they live on, or that there are not very many of

them and the ones that are left are old. All of these stereotypes make broad assumptions that exclude or misrepresent a large portion of Indigenous Peoples by disregarding both intersectionality of identities and the diversity of human experiences.

Indigenous Peoples work to combat essentializing by using literature and poetry as a way to showcase their different experiences. One such recent project is the anthology *Living Nations, Living Words: An Anthology of First Peoples Poetry*, which was collected by Joy Harjo of the Muscogee Creek Nation. Many poems in this anthology reflect the diversity of experience of Indigenous Peoples, especially in relation to connections to home and homeland. Two poems from the anthology particularly contrast each other in ways that refute the stereotypes about Indigenous Peoples' connections to homeland. Poems "This Island on which I Love You" by Brandy Nālani McDougall, who is of Kanaka 'Ōiwi descent, and "Off-Island CHamorus" by Craig Santos Perez, who is CHamoru, explore the variety and complexity of Indigenous experiences with connection to one's homeland, settler impact, and a sense of belonging.

### **Differing Emotional Connections**

McDougall and Santos Perez have very different relationships with the islands they associate themselves with, illustrating that not all Indigenous Peoples have the same type of emotional connection to their homelands. "This Island on which I Love You" consists mainly of imagery and description that demonstrate how much McDougall's island, Maui, means to her. The pain with which she describes outsiders' contamination of the island's beauty is what first displays her deep connection with the land. She even states that her "throat burns from the scorch / of the grenaded graves of [her] ancestors," showing that the island and its well-being are

inextricably tied with her own personal heritage and its accompanying emotional baggage (McDougall 99). McDougall also associates the island with her love for her partner, saying:

This island is alive with love,  
its storms, the cough of alchemy  
expelling every parasitic thing,  
teaching me to love you with  
the intricacies of island knowing, (101)

Linking her deep love for her partner to the island signifies that she also has these deep feelings of love for the island. This type of emotional connection appears to be a crucial part of her life, but not all Indigenous People have these feelings about their homelands to the extent that McDougall does. For example, Santos Perez's family migrated from Guåhan (Guam) to the continental US when he was fifteen, and he has not lived in Guåhan since. In "Off-Island CHamorus," he explains that he and others who have moved away from Guåhan often feel emotionally separated from their homeland:

. . . 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. (Santos Perez 16)

Santos Perez sometimes feels as though he lacks a deep emotional connection with Guåhan because he no longer lives there and no longer feels completely at home there. Anthropologist Robin Maria Delugan suggests that Santos Perez's experience of emotional distance with his homeland is shared by many other Indigenous People, especially those who have migrated like he did. According to Delugan, "[i]n the United States today, approximately seventy percent of

the North American Indian population lives outside reservations or tribal lands” (88). This statistic alone challenges the stereotype that Indigenous Peoples are always very close and connected to their homelands. Delugan goes on to suggest that “contemporary global migration and attendant displacements and circulations create new experiences that continue to challenge narrow definitions of indigeneity that require geographic or cultural fixity (in the sense of immutable ties to place and tradition)” (83). Santos Perez may not experience the same intensity of emotional connection to his homeland that McDougall does, but that does not make him any less Indigenous, and his experiences as an Indigenous person are not any less valid. Contrasting McDougall’s and Santos Perez’s poems illustrates the variety of Indigenous Peoples’ relationships with their homelands. In addition to homeland, the two poems also have very different views of the continental US and its influence.

### **Experiencing Settler Impact**

While both McDougall and Santos Perez are from islands colonized by the US, they differ in their experiences of settler impact and relationship with the continental US. McDougall clearly views the presence of outsiders as a negative force in relation to the well-being of the island. Her poem is filled with negative examples of settler impact, focusing specifically on the effects of tourism, pollution, and militarization. She states that even “the best of [their] lands / are touristed,” which causes intrusions like “the mountains tattooed with asphalt” and “hotels and luxury condos blighting / the line between ocean and sky” (McDougall 99). Even more painful than just the presence of eyesores, her descriptions of the pollution settlers bring implies that colonization has not just inconvenienced, but contaminated the island and her life on it:

. . . long brown  
fingers of sewage stretch out

from the canal, and pesticided  
tendrils flow from every ridge  
out to sea . . . (100)

McDougall also mentions “the guarded military testing grounds, / amphibious assault vehicles emerging / from the waves,” referencing the large US military presence on Hawai‘i.

Anti-militarization activists Joy Lehuanaani Enomoto and Kasha Ho‘okili Ho consider Hawai‘i to be “one of the most militarized places on earth[,]” saying additionally that “militarism *destroys the earth* and our ability to fundamentally live and take care of ourselves. And it’s doing that right now on a daily basis, the military right here in Hawai‘i, and we will be dealing with those effects for generations” (Compos et al. 16). This idea that colonization causes destruction and contamination of both the land and well-being of Indigenous Peoples is a frequent concept explored in the imagery of “This Island on Which I Love You.” Furthermore, while McDougall’s poem is not solely made up of negative examples of settler impact, the other things she chooses to discuss still subtly reinforce her condemnation of colonization. She contrasts almost every example of industrialization and militarization with descriptions of her partner and/or daughters, whom she clearly loves very much. She deliberately chooses to highlight the aspects of her family that remind her of the island in its most pure form, without the contamination she was previously describing. This is evidence that she views settler influence as completely negative since she juxtaposes it against something she loves so dearly. Throughout the poem, McDougall makes it clear that the industrialization brought by settler influence has caused her continuous heartache, and the only reason she is able to end the poem on a positive note is because of her family, not because there is any positive aspect of settler impact.

Santos Perez, on the other hand, has a more complex view of his island's relationship with its colonizer country. At the beginning of "Off-Island CHamorus," he describes his first day at his new high school after migrating to the US and how crushed he felt to be seen as an outsider in a place he felt like he should belong. Guåhan is a US territory, and Santos Perez expects to be treated like he and everyone else from Guåhan are just as American as anyone born on the continental US. This expectation is far from a reality, though—most continental Americans would be hard pressed to even find Guåhan on a map, and people from Guåhan are not permitted to vote in US elections. Additionally, in Santos Perez's perspective, they are not just Americans by technicality—they have also absorbed continental American culture:

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. (15)

Santos Perez lists these examples of a colonizing power imposing its culture on his island not to condemn the US, but actually to defend Guåhan's place in it. The choice to end this list of activities with "dying in American wars" is especially powerful, alluding to the overwhelming US military presence on Guåhan. For decades, the US military has controlled about a third of the island, and Guåhan has one of the highest military recruitment rates in all of the US and its territories due to limited opportunities for employment (Natividad and Leon Guerrero 6, 7). On a global scale, "the island of Guam is one of the most militarized places on Earth by the measure of military equipment and toxic residue, historical levels of investment, and personnel per acre" (Lutz 110). The fact that the US takes advantage of Guåhan's military resources but does not allow its people a voice in government can only be called exploitation.

“Off-Island CHamorus” challenges Americans to take responsibility for this by changing their attitudes toward Guåhan and its people. Although Santos Perez does acknowledge the hardships people from Guåhan endure because they were colonized, the poem never focuses on colonization at all, and never suggests that he experiences settler impact in a wholly negative way. Instead of condemning colonization specifically, Santos Perez chooses to comment on continental Americans’ ignorance and lack of responsibility towards Guåhan in the aftermath of colonization, urging them to treat Guåhan and its people as equal Americans. While it could be inferred from McDougall’s poem that she might wish the colonizers would leave or that they never arrived, Santos Perez seems to have the attitude that since colonization has already happened, what he wants is for his people to be accepted and welcomed as equals by continental Americans and continental American culture. Many Indigenous Peoples have chosen to integrate aspects of colonizing nations’ cultures into their own lives because “[a]s people living in predominantly Western (individualistic) societies, [they] have had to be adaptive and adaptable to circumstances” (Liu et al. 150). This adaptation to the culture of a colonizing power while still maintaining a strong sense of the Indigenous self demonstrates the idea of Indigenous resurgence, which is a “socio-cultural movement and theoretical framework that concentrates on regeneration within Indigenous communities” (Hanson 74). Resurgence describes Indigenous Peoples’ assertion of authority over their lives and identities—“it acknowledges colonialism and domination through resistance but it does not focus solely on colonialism as the most important concern. Instead, resurgence insistently focuses on Indigenous communities as sites of power and regeneration” (Hanson 74). Some Indigenous communities, such as the group Santos Perez calls “off-island CHamorus,” demonstrate resurgence alongside adaptation, developing new identity patterns and new ways to experience being Indigenous. In “Off-Island CHamorus,”

Santos Perez expresses that he has just as many ties to the continental US as to Guåhan, and that he seeks to balance those attachments in how he processes his identity. His complex relationship with the continental US and with settler impact differs greatly from McDougall's clear-cut disapproval, which displays the variety of experiences Indigenous Peoples have with colonization. However, despite these differences with respect to outside influence, both authors are able to find intrinsic meaning within themselves.

### **Crafting a Sense of Belonging**

Although McDougall and Santos Perez draw meaning from different aspects of their lives and identities, they both ultimately possess an internal sense of belonging. In "This Island on which I Love You," McDougall uses imagery and description to convey the peace and comfort she finds in the island and especially in her loved ones. In contrast to her harsh descriptions of industrialization on the island, she says to her partner, "something of you is in the rain rippling / through the wind," which has a much softer connotation (McDougall 100). She continues to connect the island and her partner in the final paragraph, saying that the island teaches her:

to depend on the archipelagic  
spelling of you lying next to me,  
.....  
to trust in the shape and curve  
of your hand reaching out to hold mine  
making and remaking an island our own. (McDougall 101)

Using the words "depend" and "trust" demonstrates the sense of peace she derives from both her partner and the island. The final line, "making and remaking an island our own," solidifies the point that McDougall has been implying throughout the poem: that she finds meaning and her



personal sense of belonging in her love for the island and for her family. The love and strength she derives from the island and her family are not only important to her own emotional journey, but also demonstrate the core aspects of Indigenous sovereignty and agency. McDougall covers a lot of negative examples of settler impact in her poem, so it is likely important to her to land the poem with a statement that reclaims the island despite the harm from intruders. The emphasis is left resting on “making and remaking,” representing creation and rebirth, and “own,” representing ownership, two critical parts of Indigenous sovereignty. Poetry that reclaims land is one way Indigenous islanders like McDougall “participate in remapping, accounting for *place* in ways that challenge landcentric views and reconfiguring the centrality of ocean pathways for sovereignty” (Na’puti 10). By weaving statements of reclaiming through her poem, McDougall creates a poem that is deeply rooted in Indigenous sovereignty as well as familial love and peace.

Santos Perez is able to arrive at a similar sense of peace by the end of his poem, but he has a much more complicated path to getting there. Unlike McDougall, Santos Perez has a much harder time establishing a sense of belonging because he finds it impossible to root his whole identity in one physical place. He has ties to both Guåhan and the continental US, but describes feeling “foreign in a domestic sense” in the US and “foreign in [his] own homeland” in Guåhan (Santos Perez 15-16). His difficulty feeling completely at home in either place causes him to “feel adrift, without itinerary or destination” (Santos Perez 16). However, despite his feelings of rootlessness, Santos Perez ends “Off-Island CHamorus” with an affirmation addressed at others who feel the same way:

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. (16)

Santos Perez uses this list of reminders to explain that even though he does not feel like he belongs to any one place in particular, that does not mean he lacks a sense of belonging in general or lacks a purpose in his life. He still feels connected to his people and his ancestry even if he does not necessarily feel fully connected to the physical island of Guåhan anymore; in fact, he embraces migration as a part of his heritage. The final line of “Off-Island CHamorus,” “home is an archipelago of belonging,” reaffirms that Santos Perez’s sense of belonging can span many places and many aspects of his identity (16). According to Delugan, this mindset has become more popular among Indigenous Peoples as migration rates have increased. In fact, “[m]igration and diaspora [only] add to the spectrum of contemporary indigenous experiences[,]” and for Santos Perez and many others like him, “diasporic ties to distant social and cultural worlds are balanced with a broader inclusive framework of what it means to be and belong in the world” (Delugan 85). Just because Santos Perez finds his sense of belonging in more places than his homeland and across more of his identities than being CHamoru does not mean that he is any less Indigenous or that his experience is less Indigenous. Both McDougall’s and Santos Perez’s ways of finding meaning in their lives and identities contribute to the wide variety of real Indigenous experiences with belonging.

## **Conclusion**

Poems “This Island on which I Love You” by Brandy Nālani McDougall and “Off-Island CHamorus” by Craig Santos Perez offer two different viewpoints on Indigenous experiences

with connection to homeland, settler impact, and a sense of belonging. While McDougall has deep emotional ties to the island she lives on, Santos Perez often struggles to feel the same level of connection to a homeland he has not lived on in years. Even though both authors' islands were colonized by the US, Santos Perez stakes part of his identity in being a US citizen and having ties to the continental US, while for McDougall, the continental US means nothing and settler impact has only brought her pain. However, despite these differences, both McDougall and Santos Perez are able to ground themselves in a sense of belonging, drawing meaning from many aspects of their lives and identities, such as their loved ones, their ancestry, the places they live, and more. Far from being contradictory, McDougall's and Santos Perez's very different life experiences demonstrate the wide variety of real and valid Indigenous interpretations of the concepts of homeland and belonging. Their examples help to broaden readers' viewpoints and deconstruct the essentializing of Indigenous experiences.

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