"Island of No Birdsong": Towards an Archipelagic Poetics of Extinction

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> Imagine a single survivor, a lonely fugitive at large on mainland Mauritius at the end of the seventeenth century. Imagine this fugitive as a female. She would have been bulky and flightless and befuddled – but resourceful enough to have escaped and endured when the other birds didn't. Or else she was lucky. . . . Imagine that her last hatchling had been snarfed by a feral pig. That her last fertile egg had been eaten by a monkey. That her mate was dead, clubbed by a hungry Dutch sailor, and that she had no hope of finding another. During the past halfdozen years, longer than a bird could remember, she had not even set eyes on a member of her own species.
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> *Raphus cucullatus* had become rare unto death. But this one flesh-and-blood individual still lived. Imagine that she was thirty years old, or thirty-five, an ancient age for most sorts of bird but not impossible for a member of such a large-bodied species. She no longer ran, she waddled. Lately she was going blind. Her digestive system was balky. In the dark of an early morning in 1667, say, during a rainstorm, she took cover beneath a cold stone ledge at the base of one of the Black River cliffs. She drew her head down against her body, fluffed her feathers for warmth, squinted in patient misery. She waited. She didn't know it, nor did anyone else, but she was the only dodo on Earth. When the storm passed, she never opened her eyes. This is extinction.[2]

The Only Dodo on Earth

The dodo is emblematic of the ongoing human-driven sixth mass extinction, which is predicted to be the most devastating extinction event since the asteroid strike that killed the dinosaurs (Kolbert). The phrase "dead as a dodo" is evidence of its close association with species mortality. A large, somewhat ungainly, flightless bird endemic to Mauritius, the dodo probably mostly ate fallen fruit, along with seeds, bulbs, crustaceans, and insects. In the absence of mammals, the dodo had few competitors for these foods, nor did it have any

1 DOI : 10.61736/XHHR9368.

2 David Quammen, *The Song of the Dodo: Island Biogeography in an Age of Extinctions*, New York, Scribner, 1996, p. 275.

significant predators. However, the dodo died out not long after Dutch sailors began arriving on the East African island, which had been previously visited only by Arab traders and Portuguese navigators. Not only did the Dutch hunt and eat dodos (which were easily captured) themselves, but the rats, pigs, and monkeys they brought with them likely ate dodo eggs and young chicks, while other invasive animal species that came along on the journey outcompeted the bird for food sources. As a result, the dodo went from being discovered in the late sixteenth century (the first recorded mention of the dodo is by Dutch sailors in 1598[3]) to extinction in less than a hundred years (the last dodo sighting was reported in 1662[4]). As Thom van Dooren, who opens his book *Flight Ways: Life and Loss at the Edge of Extinction* with the tragic story of the dodo, puts it: "After thousands of years of peacefully gorging on fruits, the Dodo was suddenly thrust into an encounter with European culture, and just as quickly slipped out of the world"[5].

Van Dooren goes on to note that the dodo occupies a prominent place in many contemporary accounts of extinction – in fact, the bird and the biological process can even be seen to have become synonymous[6]. While humans had already been involved in the loss of other species, the dodo stands out in that it is "the first species whose extinction was conceded – in writing – to have been caused by humans"[7]. Its extinction, attributable to human activity, occurred at a time of growing awareness among European explorers and colonists of the devastating environmental impact of capitalism and colonialism, especially on small islands[8]. As Ursula Heise points out in her book *Imagining Extinction: The Cultural Meanings of Endangered Species*, the dodo's extinction thus became "a recurrent symbol of the destruction of nature wrought by the imperialist expansion of European modernity"[9]. Heise analyses it as a case of what Renato Rosaldo has called "imperialist nostalgia", not in the sense of nostalgia for the cultures destroyed by colonization but in the sense of a longing for a vanished natural world that European travellers' own arrival had caused to disappear[10]. In implicating humans and calling them to responsibility, the story of the dodo is an early example of an extinction narrative pointing to a broader crisis in humans' interactions with nature under modernity. It continues to be told to this day – in fact, the quotation with which I began this essay is from one of the best-known popular-science books on species extinction, in which the story of the dodo plays a central role, as is already apparent from its title: *The Song of the Dodo: Island Biogeography*

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3 Thom van Dooren, *Flight Ways: Life and Loss at the Edge of Extinction*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2014, p. 2.

4 Ursula Heise, *Imagining Extinction: The Cultural Meaning of Endangered Species*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2016, p. 36.

5 Thom van Dooren, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

6 *Id. Ibid.*

7 Beverly Stearns and Stephen Stearns, qtd. in Thom van Dooren, *op. cit.*, p. 3; see also Ursula Heise, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

8 Thom van Dooren, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

9 Ursula Heise, *op. cit.*, p. 37; see also Anna Guasco, "'As Dead as a Dodo': Extinction Narratives and Multispecies Justice in the Museum", *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space*, vol. 4, n°3, 2021, p. 1056.

10 Ursula Heise, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

in an Age of Extinctions. In the excerpt quoted, David Quammen, the author of the book, recounts the death of the fictional last dodo, translating extinction into narrative by focusing on the paradigmatic "last of the species" or endling[11].

Anthropocene Islands

As an island extinction narrative expressing unease over the consequences of modernization, the story of the dodo is unexceptional. In their introductory contribution to a special section of the journal *Dialogues in Human Geography* on "Anthropocene Islands", as well as in their eponymous monograph, David Chandler and Jonathan Pugh note that Anthropocene scholarship has turned away from modernity's human/nature divide to embrace the notion of humanity's relational entanglement with the more-than-human. This shift has been facilitated, they argue, by the figure of the island, which has allowed us to develop alternatives to hegemonic, modern, mainland, or "one world" thinking. Once regarded as isolated, backward, and insignificant, the island has become a key site for understanding relational entanglements. "There is little doubt", Chandler and Pugh write, "that the widespread contemporary interest in islands mirrors the rise of non-modern, relational, non-linear, and more-than-human thinking across many academic disciplines and policy practices"[12]. Rather than being on the periphery, islands are increasingly perceived as "central to the overarching problematic of the Anthropocene today: moving beyond the modernist paradigm of thought and understanding"[13]. They exert a powerful pull on the imagination of scholars, writers, artists, and activists alike, who are all keen to engage this generative and productive figure for thought.

A case in point is the environmental humanities scholar Elizabeth DeLoughrey, whose 2019 book *Allegories of the Anthropocene* argues that Anthropocene scholarship must pay due attention to narratives from the Global South, and particularly from "those island regions that have been and continue to be at the forefront of ecologically devastating climate change"[14]. DeLoughrey points out that islands have long been a popular trope in allegorical storytelling. Classics of the English literary canon from Thomas More's *Utopia* to Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* have relied on the figure of the island to move between local and global scales, the island and the Earth. What makes the island a useful analogue for the globe as a whole is its "simultaneous boundedness and its permeability to travelers – and therefore its susceptibility to radical change"[15]. It is particularly resonant in the Anthropocene epoch, when "planetary boundaries"[16] are being crossed, with climate change and biodiversity loss threatening to destabilize the very basis of life on Earth. Both sea-level

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11 *Ibid.*, p. 38.

12 David Chandler and Jonathan Pugh, "Anthropocene Islands: There Are Only Islands after the End of the World", *Dialogues in Human Geography,* vol. 11, n°3, 2021, p. 15.

13 *Id. Ibid.*

14 Elizabeth DeLoughrey, *Allegories of the Anthropocene*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2019, p. 2.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

16 Johan Rockström *et al.*, "A Safe Operating Space for Humanity", *Nature,* vol. 461, 2009.

rise and species extinctions are highly evident in island spaces, which thus become "a figure of finitude – of spatial as well as temporal earthly limits"[17]. Well-known examples of Anthropocene island narratives functioning synecdochally include the stories of not only the extinction of the dodo of Mauritius, but also the ecological collapse of Rapa Nui (Easter Island) and the predicted inundation of the Maldives or the Marshall Islands due to climate change. In all of these tales a cautionary note is struck, as the fate of the island in question is seen to anticipate that of our "Earth island" as a whole. Local ecological damage serves as a canary in the coal mine, foreshadowing planetary catastrophe.

Another high-profile publication that bears out Chandler and Pugh's claim about how Anthropocene thinking works with islands for the development of relational ways of being and knowing is the Indian novelist Amitav Ghosh's 2021 non-fiction book *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis*. Like the story of the dodo, *The Nutmeg's Curse* revolves around an island in the Indian Ocean where seventeenth-century Dutch colonizers caused mass death and destruction. The book examines how today's climate emergency is an extension and a result of imperialist policies going back hundreds of years. Ghosh traces the current planetary crisis back to the mechanistic and dualistic worldview that emerged in Europe as colonial empires were making inroads in the Americas and other parts of the world. From this perspective, the Earth is but an object to be dominated, exploited, and profited from. Indigenous understandings of the natural world as alive, sacred, and deserving of reverence rather than inert and dead matter, a mute resource waiting to be extracted, were denigrated and dismissed as backward and primitive superstitions.

Ghosh uses the gruesome history of the Banda Islands, a remote archipelago that is today part of Indonesia, as the point of departure for his scathing critique of the colonial mindset of official modernity that continues to determine geopolitics to this day. In 1621, officials of the Dutch East India Company committed a massacre on the islands, the only place where nutmeg grew at the time, to secure a monopoly on the spice trade: "the Banda problem needs a final solution: the islands must be emptied of their inhabitants"[18]. More than ninety percent of the Bandanese population were killed, victims of what has come to be known as the "resource curse". Ghosh begins and ends his book with a gripping account of that infamous massacre amounting to genocide, which he sees as exemplary of Western colonialism's violent exploitation of both human life and the natural environment that is at the origin of our contemporary climate crisis. He reconceives modernity as a centuries-long campaign of "omnicide", with the hegemonic global powers treating the planet – including its plants, animals, and non-white peoples – as an object to be subjugated and devoured: mute and deprived of agency, available for the taking and killing. Indeed, at the heart of the vision of world-as-resource lies an "unrestrainable excess" that "leads ultimately not just to genocide but an even greater violence, an impulse that can only be called 'omnicide', the desire to destroy everything"[19]. The antidote Ghosh prescribes for the urge to omnicide that he sees as inherent in Western

17 Elizabeth DeLoughrey, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

18 Amitav Ghosh, *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2021, p. 13.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 75.

geopolitical dominance is the rehabilitation of the very non-mechanistic and vitalist modes of thought Western culture has pushed to the margins. He urgently calls for the restoration of agency and voice to non-humans and the adoption of a new global politics of vitality when we tell ourselves stories about the planet and our relationship with it: "The fate of humans, and all our relatives, depends on it"[20].

Archipelagic Poetics

In the remainder of this essay, I will focus on a literary island extinction narrative in which many of the threads from the previous part come together. For one thing, it resonates with the story of the dodo: while it is set on an island in a different ocean, it also memorializes a bird species threatened with extinction due to Western intervention. Moreover, in a manner reminiscent of Ghosh's notion of omnicide, it connects ecocide and genocide, tying the fate of non-human and human animals together. Finally, it can be seen to promote a shift in mindset of the kind envisaged by Chandler and Pugh as well as Ghosh, which may yet help redress some of the damage done on the island and open up different, more wholesome planetary futures. In other words, it refuses to forfeit hope.

The narrative in question is a four-part series of poems titled "*ginen* island of no birdsong" by Craig Santos Perez, which is included in his fourth poetry collection titled *from unincorporated territory [lukao]* and published in 2017. The "unincorporated territory" from the title is the poet's native island of Guam, a US territory in the Micronesia subregion of the western Pacific Ocean. Guam is the southernmost and largest member of the Mariana Islands archipelago. Colonization by the Spanish, who settled the island in the seventeenth century, led to the decimation of the Indigenous CHamoru population, to which Perez belongs, and the suppression of their culture, language, and religion. The island passed into American control in 1898, during the Spanish-American War. Occupied by the Japanese during the Second World War, it went back to being a United States possession afterwards and is still a major strategic asset to the US military. People born on Guam are considered US citizens, but, through an anomaly in US law, they have no vote in presidential elections, nor does their delegate to the House of Representatives have voting power. Guamanians are effectively treated as second-class citizens – the reality hidden behind the island's designation as "unincorporated territory" which, according to CHamoru activists, is but a euphemism for "colony".

Perez is the acclaimed author of six books of poetry, in which he explores themes such as his ancestry as a native Pacific islander, the legacies of imperial rule, the ecological plight of his homeland, and the diasporic condition. In 1995, when he was fifteen years old, Perez's family moved to California. He lived there for another fifteen years before relocating to Hawai'i, where he now teaches creative writing, eco-poetry, and Pacific literature as a professor of English at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. Extinction is a recurrent concern in his work, becoming increasingly prominent in his last four collections. While my focus will be on "*ginen* island of no birdsong" from Perez's fourth book of poetry, that series of poems builds on an

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 275.

earlier, more compact series, "*ginen* the micronesian kingfisher [*i sihek*]," from his third collection, titled *from unincorporated territory [guma']*, which is continued in his latest collection, titled *from unincorporated territory [åmot]*. Moreover, Perez's fifth book of poetry, *Habitat Threshold*, features a whole array of poems addressing the extinction of fauna and flora as well as non-living entities.

The way this theme runs through his oeuvre is characteristic of what the poet himself has described in terms of an archipelagic poetics. In an essay titled "Indigenous Pacific Islander Geopoetics", Perez reflects on how formally speaking his work is archipelagic through and through:

> I articulate an Indigenous Pacific Islander geopoetics through the "archipelagic form" of my serial, multi-book poetry series, *from unincorporated territory*. … I envision each individual book as an island with a unique poetic geography. The book-island is inhabited by the living and the dead, the human and the more-than-human, the land and the sea, and multiple voices and silences. … The book series is an archipelago, a birthing and formation of book-islands. Like an archipelago, the books are related and interwoven to the other islands, yet unique. Reading the books in a series is akin to traveling and listening across an archipelago. Because Guam is part of an archipelago, the geography inspired the form of my book series. (324-325)

This relational, archipelagic sensibility extends to the arrangement of the poems within each book. Perez points out that, just as each instalment in the five-part *from unincorporated territory* series contains "from" in its title, to indicate that it is "an excerpt of a larger, serial book project", so the title of each poem within each book starts with the word "from" – or "ginen", its counterpart in the CHamoru language (325). "This marks each poem as an excerpt of a longer, ongoing poem", he writes, a poem that continues across a single book or even across multiple books (326). This "trans-book threading" creates "an archipelagic, interwoven geopoetics" (326). Perez's poetry thus formally enacts the relational entanglements that Chandler and Pugh view as integral to contemporary Anthropocene thinking.

From unincorporated territory [lukao], the collection containing the poem that concerns us here, consists of four sections (as a quiet homage to T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*[21]), each of which comprises five poems. These poems repeat with identical titles in the subsequent sections, signalling their status as constituent parts of a larger whole. Separate strands that are braided together, they rely on one another and gradually build strength. "*Ginen* island of no birdsong" is the title of the final poem of each section. Referring to the environmental harm inflicted on Guam, it tells the story of the endangerment and extinction of the island's native birds, which it juxtaposes with the story of CHamoru migration. Perez provides some background on the ecology of Guam in a poignant 2020 essay also titled "Island of No Birdsong", where he shares his memories of the loss of Guam's avian life, reflects on its implications, and expresses the grief he feels over it. The poet's homeland has already endured some of the irreversible damage to biodiversity and ecosystems that scientists predict will happen across the planet within the

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21 Rajiv Mohabir and Craig Santos Perez, "Poet to Poet Interview: Rajiv Mohabir and Craig Santos Perez", *Kenyon Review*, 20 Feb. 2019.

next few decades. Indeed, in 2019 a landmark report by the United Nations' Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) warned that around one million animal and plant species are threatened with extinction, many within decades, more than ever before in human history. No fewer than ten of Guam's twelve native bird species have already vanished in the wild, as a result of habitat destruction and the introduction of invasive species by the US military. Extinct in the wild, they survive mostly in zoos on the US mainland, which launched captive breeding programmes in the 1980s to save the species from complete extinction. Guam's near-extinct birds effectively act as canaries in the coal mine of the sixth mass extinction, which is currently underway.

Island of No Birdsong

While "*ginen* island of no birdsong" touches on several endangered or extinct species, the poem centres on one of them, the Micronesian kingfisher, or "sihek" in CHamoru, a bird endemic to Guam that, as Perez writes in his essay, was his favourite because it is "so colorful. Blue tails, metallic green-blue wings, orange, cinnamon, and white breasts. Long black beaks". The introduction of the brown tree snake, which arrived on the island aboard a military cargo ship after the Second World War, decimated the population of the Micronesian kingfisher, almost bringing it to the point of extinction. Perez observes that twenty-nine wild Micronesian kingfishers were captured by conservationists for captive breeding programmes in 1984, and that the last wild specimen was seen in 1988. At present there are only around 150 Micronesian kingfishers alive at more than two dozen zoos across the US and one government facility on Guam, a population that is "too small and vulnerable to be released in the wild". In fact, Perez saw a living Micronesian kingfisher for the first time as a twenty-year-old student visiting the San Diego Zoo, a moving scene he describes both in the essay and in the poem. Rather than focusing exclusively on this one species, though, Perez notes the impact its disappearance is having on the wider ecosystem. For example, the jungles have not only gone silent but are also starting to thin, as "most tree species rely on birds to disperse and generate seeds", and Guam has more spiders than other, nearby islands as the birds that used to eat them have vanished.

The poems' title refers to the impact of the extinction of Guam's native birds on the soundscape of the island. The first poem opens with a quotation from a 1986 article by Larry Shelton, a past curator at the Philadelphia and Houston Zoos who had played a leading role in the establishment of the Guam Bird Rescue Project:

> It was the heavy silence. A dawn in the tropics without bird sounds bordered on the surreal. The silence was so complete that it seemed to be audible, and so eerie that I felt like shuddering. There were no more native forest birds in southern Guam. Their last stand was in the northern third of the island. Rachel Carson's silent spring was already a year-round affair in southern Guam.
> Extinction was no longer some textbook abstraction here; it was a reality – a silent reality. (22)

In this excerpt, Shelton cites Rachel Carson's influential environmental science book *Silent Spring*, which back in 1962 warned of a time when, in the words of John Keats, "no birds

[would] sing" due to the indiscriminate use of pesticides. In Guam, bird extinctions similarly risk producing an audible silence, not seasonally but permanently. Indeed, at the end of the first poem, the speaker states that, having grown up on the island, he has "no / memories of bird // -song" (23). The crushing reality of "avian silence" (38), which gives the poems their title, is mentioned once more in the second poem. Each poem in the series does include the sound of the Micronesian kingfisher or another endangered bird transliterated, but it is placed under erasure: the text is faint, greyed out, suggesting "a ghosting, a vanishing"[22]. Thus, bird sounds are simultaneously present and absent: they are there on the page for the reader to reproduce, but the typography will not for a moment allow them to forget the sobering fact that Guam's forests have actually gone silent.

The segments of the four-part "*ginen* island of no birdsong" sequence are collages or assemblages: they consist of quotations from diverse sources and transliterated bird calls, as well as fragments of the poet's own memories and prayers in both CHamoru and English. The poems have a common structure in that they all conclude with a prayer and are punctuated by notations tracking the birth and development of a Micronesian kingfisher bred and raised in captivity. These are short, factual, telegram-like messages such as "day one: blind and naked" (22) and "day five: flight feather tracts visible on wings" (23), and they go all the way up to "day thirty: fully feathered" and "day thirty-five: fledging" (71). Along the way, the poet also reminisces about "studying native birds of guam in school" (22) and coming face to face with a Micronesian kingfisher as a student: "i was 20 years old the first time i saw a living micronesian kingfisher // the shy bird hid in the corner of the hi-tech cage at the san diego zoo \\ 'view inside a micronesian kingfisher nest log through live video feed' // it didn't make a sound" (54). Once again, no birdsong is heard. These personal recollections alternate with accounts of episodes from the captive breeding programme that appear to be borrowed from news stories, for example this one:

> In 2010, a mated pair of Micronesian kingfishers…laid two fertile eggs this spring inside a hollowed-out palm log in a special breeding room of the Chicago Lincoln Park Zoo bird house. Keepers promptly stole one of the eggs…The parents incubated and hatched one egg in the hollow log…The other egg hatched a few days later inside an incubation machine in a lab, where the chick now lives, fed by keepers from tweezers protruding beneath the beak of an oversized kingfisher hand puppet (23)

The next line reads, "violent care" (23), a concept borrowed from van Dooren[23] that can be interpreted as a wry comment on the treatment meted out to the birds.

While the "*ginen* island of no birdsong" sequence is primarily concerned with the Micronesian kingfisher, it is careful to avoid treating this charismatic bird in isolation from other species – a common pitfall in extinction narratives, as van Dooren points out. The approach van Dooren takes to thinking through extinction in *Flight Ways* centres on "avian

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22 Perez, qtd. in Christopher Nelson, "Interview with Craig Santos Perez on *from unincorporated territory [lukao]*", *Green Linden Press,* 25 Nov. 2017.

23 Thom van Dooren, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

entanglements": instead of focusing exclusively on individual threatened bird species, he studies "birds and their relationships", "the webs of interaction in which living beings emerge, are held in the world, and eventually die"[24]. These multispecies entanglements explicitly include humans: van Dooren rejects the exceptionalism that sets human beings apart from all other animals and the rest of the natural world. Paying attention to avian entanglements "unsettles human exceptionalist frameworks" in that it reveals how "humans – as individuals, as communities, and as a species – are implicated in the lives of disappearing others"[25]. Perez's ecopoetry shows a similarly relational take on extinction. To begin with, the "*ginen* island of no birdsong" sequence situates the loss of the Micronesian kingfisher within the larger context of Guam's native birds threatened with extinction. It repeatedly references the Mariana crow or "aga", particularly in the second segment, which recounts how that bird has undergone the same fate: "fanhasso studying the endemic marianas crow, or aga, in school // 'added to the endangered species list in 1984' \\ 'scientists placed electric barriers around nests, built facilities for artificial incubation, and transferred ten wild-caught crows to u.s. zoos for captive breeding'" (38). The brown tree snake, the rapidly multiplying predator responsible for the near-extinction of both bird species, also gets a mention (38), as do the spiders these birds used to eat and whose population has similarly exploded (54), and the island's native fire tree, which has become endangered due to there being no more birds to scatter its seeds (70). Describing these same trends in his essay "Island of No Birdsong", Perez comments: "The loss of our birds continues to echo throughout the fragile, tropical ecosystem".

However, the sequence dwells particularly on avian-human relationships. While exploring the environmental impact of ongoing colonization and militarization, it also taps into the metaphorical potential of the damage done to the island's fauna and flora. Throughout the four-part series of poems, Perez foregrounds kinship ties between Guam's native birds and the CHamoru people. These ties are emphasized through the speaker's reference to the birds by their CHamoru names. CHamoru humans and animals have both suffered at the hands of empire, as a result of what Ghosh calls the omnicidal impulse, that is, the desire to destroy everything. This shared oppression of different life forms is first hinted at in the first poem, which juxtaposes the experiences of the Micronesian kingfisher and the migration history of the CHamoru people:

> Fanhasso : *remember* studying native birds of guam in school // 'the micronesian kingfisher, or sihek, can see into the water' \\ 'added to the endangered species list in 1984' // 'the last wild birds were captured and transferred to american zoos for captive breeding' \\ vocabulary test : 'invasive, colonize, extirpate, extinct' // 44,000 chamorros now live in california \\ 15,000 in washington (22)

A similar juxtaposition occurs in the next segment, which, upon mentioning the transfer of the few surviving Mariana crows to US zoos for captive breeding, informs the reader that "10,000 chamorros now live in texas \\ 7,000 in hawai'i" (38). The third segment continues

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24 *Ibid.*, p. 4.
25 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

this pattern, following its account of the birth of a Micronesian kingfisher in a US zoo, which brings the total population to 129 birds, all living in captivity, with more such demographic data points: "70,000 chamorros still live on guam \\ 150,000 now live off-island" (54). The next line makes the purpose of these juxtapositions clear: "is migration our 'species survival plan'" (54). In the fourth segment, the speaker reflects on one of the reasons why Guam's Indigenous people migrate in such great numbers – to join the US military – using avian metaphors: "[we] flock to recruitment centers, ensnared // *a cage can be either solid material wire mesh or* … \\ 'chamorros have the highest per capita enlistment rate in the united states'" (70). Again, he wonders, "is this our species survival plan" (70). Both human and non-human CHamorus are engaged, it is suggested, in a struggle for species survival that takes them far away from their homeland. Indeed, in his essay "Island of No Birdsong", Perez observes that "My people started migrating in large numbers around the same time our native birds began disappearing".

Intimate kinship relations between humans and non-humans are emphasized throughout the sequence, for instance when, in one of the prayers, the speaker imagines his people as a bird species: "[we] still feel / ghost limb pain / where our wings / once belonged" (39). These human birds have lost their wings through amputation, it seems, leading them to feel phantom pain. This medical metaphor drives home how deeply and viscerally the CHamoru people feel the disappearance of Guam's native birds: far from seeing it as something that does not concern them, they experience it as the loss of a body part, something that affects and diminishes them in a tangible way. The interwovenness of human and non-human lives is further exemplified by the last fragment of greyed-out birdsong in the sequence, in which human and non-human Indigenous voices mingle: "'kaaa-ah o asaina kaaa-ah o aniti' / 'kshh-skshh-skshh-kroo-ee o asaina / kroo-ee kroo-ee o aniti'" (71). The words "o asaina o aniti," which translate as "o ancestors, o spirits", "call[] on the ancestors to protect us", as Perez explains on the companion website for the book. They appear alone once in the second segment and twice in the third one; in the fourth and final one, though, they merge with the birdsong. Clearly, we are a far cry here from human exceptionalism; relational entanglement is the name of the game. In fact, one would be hard pressed to find a better illustration of this concept than this convergence of Indigenous voices across species lines.

The insistence on relational entanglement that is at the heart of the "*ginen* island of no birdsong" sequence can be seen to spring from a "commitment to the continuity of diverse ways of life"[26]. Perez's eco-poetry actively intervenes in hegemonic discourses that have brought his native island, and by extension our "Earth island", to the brink of ecological ruin. Working against the omnicidal logic of official modernity, it draws the reader into new connections, with which come new responsibilities. In his essay "From *Unincorporated Poetic Territories*", Perez writes that he values "poems that speak against the colonial forces that create indigenous absence and silence", "poems that assert indigenous survival and presence in all our complexity" (263). The prayers with which the different segments end are important in this regard. As the literary critic Anna Mai Yee Jansen has observed, these prayers initially

26 Thom van Dooren, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

venture "a tentative hope"[27]: "i want to believe in / the resurrection of / our bodies" (23; 39). However, these cautiously hopeful prayers give way to more confident avowals of faith in renewal and regeneration in the last two segments: "i believe in the resilience of our bodies" (55); "i believe in the resurgence / of our bodies because / [we] are the seeds / ginen the last hayun lågu / waiting to be rooted / into kantan chamorrita / waiting to be raised / once more into lukao" (71). The later segments also increasingly incorporate Indigenous voices pushing against extinction, including the Native American poet Joy Harjo, who is quoted as saying that "No story or song will translate the full impact of falling, or the inverse power of rising up. Of rising up" (70). That "inverse power of rising up" is evident in the last stage in the development process of the Micronesian kingfisher that the poem describes: "day thirty-five: fledging" (71). With every new bird ready to take flight, the odds increase of the species rebounding from the brink of extinction, a resurrection of sorts. As Jansen argues, by the end of the sequence, "the hegemonic story of absence and silence" has been drowned out by the prospect of "a future of survival and presence"; "a narrative of loss" has given way to "one of resilience and resurrection"[28].

What Is Missing?

While I have largely zoomed in on one near-extinction story from one island in my discussion of Perez's eco-poetry so far, the poet is keenly aware that he is addressing a global phenomenon. *Habitat Threshold*, his fifth book of poetry and his first to be published outside the *from unincorporated territory* series, contains several poems exploring the extinction or endangerment of species from elsewhere, most notably his current home state of Hawai'i, which, like Guam, has the unenviable reputation of being one of the "extinction capitals of the world"[29]. The poem "The Last Safe Habitat", for example, which continues the theme of "avian silence" (45) from the sequence we have looked at, recounts a heart-wrenching last-of-the-species narrative about a Hawai'ian native bird, the Kauai'i 'ō'ō, a species of honeyeater. In addition to panning to extinctions of individual species happening in other parts of the world, the collection also zooms out: it even includes a poem titled "Th S xth M ss Ext nct n", in which most of the vowels are missing in a typographical echo of the dramatic loss of species the planet is suffering (36), as well as a graph showing the steep increase in global species extinction rates that started in the nineteenth century and accelerated after 1950 (31). Moreover, several poems in *Habitat Threshold* explicitly reference the Anthropocene and its alternative denominations (Capitalocene, Plantationocene, and Chthulucene) in their titles, in

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27 Anne Mai Yee Jansen, "Writing toward Action: Mapping an Affinity Poetics in Craig Santos Perez's *from unincorporated territory*", *Native American and Indigenous Studies,* vol. 6, n°2, 2019, p. 14.

28 *Ibid*., p. 15.

29 Craig Santos Perez, "Island of No Birdsong", *Nad Now: The Journal of the National Academy of Design*, vol. 14, Oct. 2020.

another clear sign that Perez's eco-poetry is concerned to link local extinction stories to larger-scale processes and developments[30].

The poet does not hide his admiration for another artist who moves back and forth between the local and global levels in her work on the sixth mass extinction. Perez opens and concludes his essay "Island of No Birdsong" with a discussion of an artwork by the American artist and architect Maya Lin, who is best known for designing Washington, DC's Vietnam Veterans Memorial. That memorial, which honours all members of the US armed forces who died as a result of their service in the Vietnam War, manages to give visitors a sense of the large-scale loss of human lives while also memorializing each individual service member. More recently, though, Lin has turned her attention to species loss. In 2010 she launched a website called *What Is Missing?*, which serves as a global memorial to the planet. It is intended to be her "last memorial", she says, and one that she will be adding to for the rest of her life[31]. The site showcases the numerous disappearing creatures and environments on our planet. Its home page features a map covered in colourful dots, many of which represent endangered or extinct species. Clicking on these dots leads the visitor to images or videos of, and stories about, those species. The black-and-grey colour scheme of the map, which is referred to as the "Map of Memory", recalls the black granite stone of Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial with its grey inscriptions[32].

There is also an interactive page allowing people to add their own memories to the map, or stories they were told by their parents or grandparents about *their* memories of the way it used to be: something they have personally witnessed diminish or disappear from the natural world. Thus, they can help transform "a global memorial" into "something both personal and close to home"[33]. The goal is to create "a collective memory of the planet"[34] that can help wake people up to environmental generational amnesia, also known as shifting baseline syndrome; that is, "a gradual change in the accepted norms for the condition of the natural environment due to a lack of experience, memory, and/or knowledge of its past condition"[35]. Or, as the *What Is Missing?* website explains it: "Each successive generation accepts what they

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30 The Anthropocene, the name given to the new geological epoch defined by the transformative impact of human activity on the planet, has been criticized for blaming the climate and ecological crisis on a generalized and homogenized humanity. After all, in so doing, it invisibilizes systemic factors driving environmental destruction and degradation such as capitalism and colonialism and obscures the differential responsibilities of colonizers and colonized, capitalists and workers, haves and have-nots. Alternative terms such as Capitalocene (Malm; Moore) and Plantationocene (Haraway *et al.*; Tsing) identify the capitalist mode of production or the plantation system and the specific societies adopting it as bearing primary responsibility. The Chthulucene (Haraway), for its part, rejects the human-centredness of the Anthropocene and defines the current era instead as one in which the human and the non-human are inextricably intertwined.

31 Maya Lin, *What Is Missing? project*, 2010.

32 Maya Lin, "About the Project", *What Is Missing? project*, 2010.

33 Maya Lin, "Share a Memory", *What Is Missing? project*, 2010.

34 May Lin, "About the Project".

35 Masashi Soga and Kevin J. Gaston, "Shifting Baseline Syndrome: Causes, Consequences, and Implications", *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment*, vol.16, n°4, 2018, p. 222.

see as normal, not realizing what has been lost. And over time we forget how abundant the natural world once was"[36].

What Is Missing? is actually a multimedia and multi-sited project – "a work that can exist in multiple forms and places around the world", as the website puts it[37]. Though the website serves as its nexus, the memorial also includes permanent sound and media sculptures, travelling exhibitions, and temporary installations such as *Ghost Forest*, a haunting public art installation from 2021 consisting of forty-nine dead trees in midtown Manhattan's Madison Square Park. In his essay "Island of No Birdsong", though, Perez does not go into these other shapes and forms the *What Is Missing?* project takes. Curious to see how Lin would "pivot from memorializing humans to more-than-human species", he looked up the species missing from Guam and Hawai'i on the Map of Memory. He found many entries, which stirred various memories and emotions in him that he went on to describe in the essay; most of these are also recorded in his extinction poems. Whether these poems pre- or post-date his encounter with Lin's project is not entirely clear, though the latter is the more likely scenario. Looking over the whole map of *What Is Missing?*, Perez muses: "So much loss, everywhere. Is it safe, anywhere? The scale of the sixth mass extinction is disorienting, engulfing". He concludes that "For me, it [*What Is Missing?*] has created a space to feel my grief, reflect on extinction, and remember what was lost. It has inspired me to do what I can to conserve what has survived, restore our relationship to the world, and cultivate hope for a more sustainable future". While Perez goes on to thank Lin for creating this space for us, his own work performs a very similar service in helping us navigate the predicament of our "Earth island" or planetary archipelago.

Lost to Human Memory

Lin's project inevitably also commemorates the dodo, the poster child of extinction. When visitors move their mouse cursor over Mauritius on the Map of Memory, they can click on a dot representing the dodo, which leads them to a page with a short, simple, and bleak video and some text on it. The camera slowly zooms out from a close-up of a partial skeleton of a dodo in a museum setting. Meanwhile, the text that appears on the page is superimposed on the image. The video uses the same black-and-grey aesthetic as the Map of Memory and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. It has no sound: there is no birdsong in it. This absence is particularly striking as sounds of extinct or endangered species and habitats are constantly playing in the background while visitors interact with the Map of Memory. However, the dodo went extinct before recording devices were invented, so its call has not been preserved: the bird has left no sonic trace. As the video notes, "Nobody knows the true sound" of the dodo[38]. Or, as Quammen puts it in the line that gave his popular-science book on extinction its title, "The song of the dodo, if it had one, has been lost to human memory"[39]. Lin's video effectively

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36 Maya Lin, "About the Project".
37 *Ibid.*
38 Maya Lin, "The Dodo", *What Is Missing? project*, 2010.
39 David Quammen, *op. cit.*, p. 262.

makes this silence audible as it seeks to sensitize visitors to the magnitude and preciousness of what has been and is being lost, not only on a small tropical island in the Indian Ocean but all around the world. Artistic responses to the sixth mass extinction such as Perez's and Lin's, which cultivate attunement to environmental loss, perform an important public service in raising awareness about the perilous state of our Earth island and the need to take urgent and collective action to preserve and restore biodiversity. They beckon us to stand at the intersection of memory and responsibility and foster a renewed commitment to nurturing a sustainnable coexistence with the myriad species that share our planet.

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