



Mariana Poems: Visiting Rem(a)inders of War

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Abstract

The three poems, "Saipan," "Tinian" and "Guam," focus on the theme of anti-aesthetics and tropical tourism. Prior to World War II, the Northern Mariana Islands including Saipan and Tinian were occupied by Japan while the southernmost island in the chain, Guam, was controlled by the USA. There was fierce fighting between the two powers on these Pacific islands during the war. Significantly, the aircraft that dropped the atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshimi and Nagasaki, which ended the war, took off from Tinian. Promoted tourism today to the Marianas is primarily for the idealised tropical beach holiday, however, away from the coast, memorials to the horrors of the war on each of the islands can be visited by those willing to engage with often uneasy dark or anti-aesthetic tourism.

Keywords: Poetry, Mariana Islands, Guam, World War II, atomic bombs, tropical tourism, dark tourism, anti-aesthetic tourism, Pacific Islands

Saipan

We stand near the northern tip of the island
this precipice is not the edge
the drop into the Pacific is visible beyond
blue of sea and sky merging on a far horizon

The sign calls this Suicide Cliff
In fear of the invading American devils
 July 1944 no end to the war in sight
the Japanese civilians pushed their children
threw their babies before leaping themselves

Hundreds of bodies lay on the coastal plain below
Some say thousands

Their screams echo on the wind

We leave we go to stand on the northern tip of the island
Banzai Cliff has jagged rocks and water below
the word means *ten thousand years* :a battle cry
as if the deaths here were part of the fight

It is not even a hundred years
since the war ended

The sign on the cliff reads
 For your own safety
 please do not go
 beyond the fenceline

Tinian

We follow the roads on the map and the feral *tangan tangan*
scratches the side of the rental car and taps on the windows
before we decide the jungle could not have reclaimed this much of the runways

We become a B-52 bomber speeding down West Runway
the kids screaming in the back and the ocean ahead of any impossible takeoff

There's not much to see in the end
a filled-in bomb loading pit a palm growing out of it
Three Japanese men older than my father posing for photographs

We leave them to the silence and park by Bomb Loading Pit No 2
The *Enola Gay* has already dropped 'Little Boy' on Hiroshima
In this second pit 'Fat Man' was readied for Nagasaki

The Japanese tourists and us could be the only people left in the world
on a small island amongst the archaeology of war
We are polite swap Pits shoot memories with our cameras

Guam

Only five miles across
thirty miles north to south
other tourists stick mostly
to the shoreline
the reef and the fish

American Marines stained
the beaches red in '44
ended Japanese Occupation

Boony-stomping is the word for hiking
the trek into the interior where
circa 1972 Shoichi Yokoi –
Sergeant of the Japanese Imperial Army
– emerged from a time capsule
built underground

Almost 28 years in his cave
hunting in the tall foxtail grass of the jungle
rats toads river eels
the last eight years more alone
than the men
who went
to the moon
waiting for his comrades to return for him
caught with his shrimp traps forced
to acknowledged his war was over

Now travellers two-by-two from Japan
honeymoon in matching shirts

Yokoi's bunker in recreation
is easily accessible
at Talofofo Falls Resort Park
the B-52s from the
Anderson Airforce Base
still pass overhead

Author Statement

Chamoru poetry is thriving in the Mariana Islands, with poets from both Guam and the Commonwealth of Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) contributing their voices at home and internationally (McMath, 2020; Perez, 2014). Poets including Craig Santos Perez (Perez, 2020; 2015), Michael Lujan Bevacqua (Bevacqua, 2009), and Cecilia Catherine Taitano Perez (Perez, 2011) speak to the pull to 'reclaim our indigenous identities' (Perez, 2016, para. 5) after centuries of colonisation in the Mariana Islands.

The three new poems here seek to pre-empt the criticism Robert Tenorio Torres levels at outsiders "whose work romanticizes Marianas history and speak well of the Marianas experience, but is not representative of the native experience" (Torres, 2004, p. 39) by being purposefully positioned from the point of view of a *tourist* visiting memorials to the Second World War. These memorials are reminders of the outsized consequences of colonisation and imperial conflicts on territories remote from the decision-making (Camacho, 2011; Quimby, 2013). It is additionally incongruous that these sites are set in a tourist destination geared for resort holidays (Babauta, 2024) of "beach, palm tree and 'exotic' dance" (Zhang, 2021, para. 1).

The poems 'Saipan,' 'Tinian,' and 'Guam' are thus part of the ongoing conversation about outsiders coming to the tropics—in this instance, for alternative and dark tourism.

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Jane Downing spent many years in the Pacific, living in Papua New Guinea, the Marshall Islands, and Guam as well as travelling to other island nations. Her poems have appeared at home in Australia and overseas including in *Meanjin*, *Rabbit*, *Cordite*, *Canberra Times*, *Not Very Quiet*, *Social Alternatives*, *Live Encounters*, *e.ratio*, *Last Stanza*, and *Best Australian Poems*. In 2025 she won the NSW Poetry Prize. Her collection, 'When Figs Fly' (Close-Up Books), was published in 2019.