

We Are Art

Mary Therese Perez Hattori

I irensia na'lá'la' i espiritu-ta.
Our heritage gives life to our spirit.

CHamoru proverb

“Nana, how do you say ‘art’ in CHamoru?” I asked my mother. She laughed, paused thoughtfully, and said, “Kustombren i CHamoru”—the customs of CHamoru people, who like other Pacific Islanders, do not view art as distinct from cultural expression. Creative cultural practices are embedded within communities, reflecting collective identities and values. Our creative expression communicates Indigenous wisdom to diverse communities, celebrates the best elements of our cultures, and helps us connect to other native peoples with spiritual affinities and shared values. Doing what is best for the collective rather than the individual, respect for elders, living in harmony with the natural world—these are life-affirming, value-generating customs of Pacific Island heritage that could mitigate the societal problems we are currently facing.

I am authoring this essay three months after a disaster declaration for Hawai‘i due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This contagion triggered stay-at-home orders and physical distancing measures, presenting culture bearers with tremendous challenges and exciting possibilities. After months of preparation, vital community activities such as the Festival of Pacific Arts, the Merrie Monarch Festival, the Cultural Animation Film Festival (CAFF), and the Celebrate Micronesia Festival were postponed. But while producing material and performative art for these celebrations has been suspended, the pandemic cannot halt our creative practices. We are motivated more than ever to live as fully as possible, be our best selves, and enrich the world with our cultures. People have deployed technology and activated human and computer networks to overcome restrictions on physical assemblies by enabling gatherings in virtual spaces. We can involve people whose inclusion in face-to-face events was prevented by geography, health, or financial concerns. Organizers from Micronesian communities in Hawai‘i and the Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum are envisioning a virtual Celebrate Micronesia Festival in 2020,

with performances pre-recorded on the museum grounds, panel discussions about pandemic-related issues, artist interviews, poetry readings, and educational videos. New virtual events such as the Hawai'i International Film Festival's HIFF@Home, CAFF for Kids, and CAFF 2020 will replace physical film festivals.

Started in 2017 as a collaboration between myself, George Siosi Samuels, the Cultural Animators Network, Michael Q. Ceballos of Twiddle Productions, and the Honolulu Museum of Art's (HoMA) Doris Duke Theatre, CAFF showcases cultures from around the world, presenting stories that are entertaining and enlightening, and demonstrating animation's power to give voice to others and enable stories to be told in new ways. Described in 2018 as "a nascent forum for creative expressions of cultural identity and practices in animation" (Bennett), the festival features stories such as "The Meaning of Māhū," from the PBS documentary *Kumu Hina*, which teaches about Hawaiians who embody both male and female spirit; and *Tongues*, a documentary about language preservation from the Native American series *Injunuity*.

Since 2017, the festival has grown in terms of films, cultures, and community partners. The 2017 festival screened thirty-nine films representing seventeen cultures, and involved six community partners. The 2019 festival featured forty-nine films and thirty-eight cultures, including Hawaiian, Taiwanese, Indigenous Australian, Brazilian, Athabaskan, Japanese, Tongan, Maori, Bolivian, Senegalese, Sāmoan, Mexican, Ghanaian, Filipino, Gaelic, Okinawan, Polish, LGBTQ, Zuni, Inuit, and Korean. We had ten community partners from different sectors: entities promoting visual arts, including UH Mānoa's (UHM) Academy for Creative Media, Kapi'olani Community College's New Media Arts Program, Pacific Islanders in Communications, DreamFloat Hawai'i, Miyu Distribution, and Hawai'i Women in Filmmaking; and organizations dedicated to education and empowerment, including the UHM Center for Pacific Islands Studies, Lady Pasifika, Access to Independence, and Raatior Ventures. Through these alliances, organizations support each other.

CAFF became a family affair, with Michael's sisters Valerie Rios Ceroni and Margie Ceballos Navarro joining the team. Valuing family above all else, Val and Margie enhanced programming with more family-oriented films, expanded the cultures represented to include people with disabilities, and secured films from more youth. CAFF 2019 was dedicated to the memory of Justin Ceballos, Margie's special needs son, who passed away that year. We are now preparing for the 2020 festival, making selections from over one hundred films.

Discussing themes in creative pieces is a way for societies to address critical questions and emotions. CAFF discussions address community engagement, financing cultural projects, preserving languages, intellectual property, and women's issues. Partnering with the Hawai'i Council for the Humanities, HIFF engages audiences in dialogues with filmmakers, and CAFF 2020 will offer discussion guides to encourage families to have multigenerational conversations about issues raised in the films.

CAFF is one of many cultural festivals that are free for film makers and audiences, making the arts more available to communities who may not feel comfortable in galleries or museum spaces reserved for art alone—venues, many with colonial histories, that often lack inclusivity and diversity. Informal exhibits hosted by local businesses also increase access to the arts. Coffee shops and restaurants offer display spaces for artists, connecting them to community members who may not attend formal exhibitions. For example, Stan Glander, President and CEO of Walnut Street Hospitality Group, the owner of Kono's Restaurants and The Surfing Pig Hawai'i, a restaurant in Kaimukī, has dedicated prime wall space to art, and hosts talks with featured artists. "I was a drummer in a band, always looking for a place to play," Stan explains. "The venues were limited in number. I'm motivated to give anyone a chance at anything if they show an interest." Regarding his restaurant, "It's not about eating," he says, "it's about getting together, connecting, talking If there's beautiful art there to discuss, to trigger imagination, that's great." As they enter and leave the dining area, guests must pass the exhibits, and often pause to discuss the art. These are creative ways for the arts and business to support each other, and to enhance the communities in which they live and work.

Cultural films such as those shown at CAFF are especially important to diverse communities who have experienced loss through colonization. For millennia, Guam's CHamoru people thrived, enjoying a matrilineal society. The objectification, exotification, and subjugation of women occurred only after Spanish missionaries, Japanese invaders, and American colonizers arrived. I grew up in a culture steeped in the value *fuetsan famalão'an*, the power of women, never experiencing sexism until I moved to the US. Cultural films also empower native peoples to assert identities underrepresented in media. As a child, I loved to escape into the worlds of books and film, though I found little resonance with characters with blue eyes, blond or auburn-hued hair, and odd names like Dick and Jane. I struggled to make meager connections to characters like Pippi Longstocking (we both have freckles and unruly hair) and Judy Blume's Margaret (we both had conversations with God). I was elated when in my teens, I discovered Marvel comics, and the X-Men's Ororo Munroe, or Storm. Brown-skinned with long, dark hair, Storm reminded me of the CHamoru *Fu'una*, a creator-being. Ororo's attunement to the forces of nature reminded me of the strong relationships islanders have with the environment.

I was deeply affected by one of HIFF's and CAFF's features, *Maisa: The Chamorro Girl Who Saves Guåhan*, about a girl who, along with the women of Guåhan, saves the island from a monster. In CHamoru with English subtitles, the film is a collaboration between Twiddle Productions, the Guam Department of Education, elders, students, CHamoru and Hawaiian artists, and animators. Such projects allow ancient cultural values to come through to the present, motivating change in the future. *Maisa* has engendered pride in many CHamoru, and inspired production of more art, including this poem celebrating women:¹

Fuetsan Famalão'an: An Anthem to Women

With my breath
I speak
I sing
I chant

with breath that vibrates
from powerful and ancient sounds
fino' i lina'la-ta, words of our life
the language of my people.

In my breath
is the collective power of CHamoru women, fuetsan famalão'an
from the first creator-woman Fu'una
of antes na tiempu, the time before time
from our maga'haga, women of power
to generations of mañaina, wise elders.

My breath is my ink
with which I craft words

words of recognition
words that heal
words that light the path for others
that clear the path for others
words that create futures.

I am LIFE
LINA'LA

I am STRENGTH
MINETGOT

I am LOVE
GUINAIYA

May we all experience love, strength, and life in creative cultural practices
celebrating our diverse communities.

Note

1. Poem originally published as “Fuetsan Famalão'an: An Anthem to Women” in *Yellow Medicine Review*.

Works Cited

- Bennett, Elizabeth. Review of The Cultural Animation Film Festival. *The Contemporary Pacific*, vol. 31 no. 2, 2019, pp. 586–88.
- Hattori, Mary. “Fuetsan Famalão'an: An Anthem to Women.” *Yellow Medicine Review: A Journal of Indigenous Literature, Art & Thought*, 2019.

A daughter of Guåhan (Guam), **Mary Therese Perez Hattori** is one of nine children of Paul Mitsuo Hattori, originally of Kalihi, and Fermina Leon Guerrero Perez (familian Titang) of Chalan Pago. Dr. Hattori works for the East-West Center and is affiliate faculty for the University of Hawai‘i.