

Repurposed Poetics: (Re)Writing Imperialism and the Environment in the Pacific

Matthew Lear

Throughout the Pacific and the American Pacific Coast, contemporary writers are responding to environmental crises by *rewriting*. From remediating old oral traditions to simply repeating language, recycling motifs, or even recasting projects into the future, there is a growing drive to repurpose in order to respond to social and ecological issues. Yet little scholarship recognizes this schema, let alone connects it to a larger ongoing context of US imperialism in the Pacific. My project at the RCC will seek to address this gap, using the collective framework of ‘repurposed poetics.’ This work will provide an overview of how and why ‘repurposing’ is used so widely to write about environmental damage in the Pacific region, focusing on the geographies of Hawai‘i, Guåhan (Guam), the Marshall Islands, and San Francisco.

My project will begin by linking the cyclical dynamic of contemporary textual recycling to Pacific oral traditions: drawing on CHamoru poet Craig Santos Perez’s ongoing poem series *From Unincorporated Territory*, before connecting Guåhan to ecological imperialism in Hawai‘i, tracing the move from exclusively oral transmission to the textual repurposing of mo’olelo in the work of Kānaka Maoli poet Donovan Kūhiō. The next section will analyze how poet Juliana Spahr repeats language to comprehend the overwhelming nature of environmental crises, with Hawai‘i as a focus. This project will then establish how the poetic (de)tours of David Buuck’s “Buried Treasure Island” casts light on ruinous sites that—though situated within the Contiguous United States—are tied inextricably to the complex histories of American militarization in the Asia-Pacific. It will conclude in exploring how Marshallese poet Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner ‘remediates’ stories and histories of environmental damage in Micronesia, such as the mejenkwaad legend and the unpublished “Jerakiaarlap: A Marshallese Epic.”

Overall, this project will elicit how ‘repurposing’ is widely and effectively used to write about environmental damage. It will make the important point of linking the cyclical dynamic of textual recycling to Pacific oral traditions, troubling this bifurcation and suggesting that this compounds as a powerful political statement. Travelling between interconnected sites of damage inflicted by US military activities in the twentieth century, I will demonstrate how and why repurposing provides essential cognitive and affective methods for staying with, and responding to, ecological imperialism throughout the region.