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Locating Guam: the Cartography of the Pacific and Craig Santos Perez’s Remapping of Unincorporated Territory

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The first inhabited Pacific Island to be found by Europeans and part of the first European colony in the Pacific, Guam in the Mariana Islands today remains on the United Nations list of seventeen non-self-governing territories, as an unincorporated organized territory of the United States of America. Guam’s ongoing colonial history thus illustrates the role of the island world of the Pacific in the formation of a European vision of globalization and the continuing purchase of this vision in the twenty-first century. The power of this vision is supported by its naturalization in a cartographic representation that reduces the world to which Guam belongs to tiny specks in an otherwise empty ocean. In his ongoing project, from Unincorporated Territory, Chamorro poet Craig Santos Perez challenges this hegemony by activating Guam’s status as a mere pinpoint on the map to highlight and unravel the effects of nearly 500 years of Western mappings of the Pacific. Thus the preface of the first volume, published in 2008, draws attention to the near invisibility of Guam on most maps, and the collection programmatically includes four actual maps made to look like poems. These map poems evoke a cartographic history that continues to subject the island of Guam to outsiders’ interests by representing Guam’s place on the routes of the Spanish galleons in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in the war in the Pacific in the 1940s, as a contemporary hub in trans-Pacific air traffic and a major site of US military bases today.¹ Recognizing that such reductions of Pacific islands to hegemonic interests are supported by conventions of European cartography in which the
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The empty(ing) map

Looking for Guam on sixteenth-century European maps, we can witness the palimpsestic emergence of a modern view of the whole world that would come to serve as an epistemic foundation to competing political claims in the age of colonialism. In the repetition of the constitutive operations of cartography, erasure and inscription, we see the gradual elaboration of what J. B. Harley has identified as the ‘logic of the map’, based on ‘abstraction, uniformity, repeatability and visuality’. We first find Guam on a European map in one of the bird’s-eye drawings of the island that were made around 1525 to illustrate Antonio Pigafetta’s account of Magellan’s voyage, which landed on Guam on 6 March 1521. The map shows Guam and its neighbouring island Rota, designating them as ‘islands of thieves’, based on an apparent proclivity attributed to the natives of the Marianas by Magellan and his crew. The