

Poems on Identity, History, Politics, and Relationships from Pohnpei, Micronesia

*Carol Ann Carl**

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I. KEILAHN AIO: ON THE OTHER SIDE OF YESTERDAY

Kaselehlle. My name is Carol Ann Carl.

Home for me is the beautiful island of Pohnpei in the Federated States of Micronesia.

Pohnpei, one state of four that make up one island nation.
Beautiful islands where people come to dive, surf, and hike on their vacation.

One nation of six
that make up the entire Micronesian region. Give me a moment,
let me try to clear the common misconception.

We have the Yapese, the Kosraean, the Pohnpeian, the Chuukese.
The Federated States of Micronesia is just one country you see.

* AD Liberal Arts, College of Micronesia – FSM; BS Biochemistry, University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa; Spring 2023 Poetry and Senses Fellow, University of California Berkeley ARC. Carol Ann Carl is a daughter of the island of Pohnpei in the Federated States of Micronesia. In 2020, she earned her Bachelor of Science degree in Biochemistry from the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa. Storytelling and writing are personal forms of pedagogical healing. Professionally and creatively, Carol Ann leans into the intersectionality of her identity—indigeneity, science, health, and civic advocacy—to develop narratives of empowerment for the Micronesian community in Hawai‘i and the wider Pacific Islander community abroad. Currently, Carol Ann is a Research Coordinator with the Māpuna Lab at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa where her work centers cultural reclamation as disaster response. She teaches 12th grade Micronesian Civics virtually at Our Lady of Mercy Catholic High School in Pohnpei. As a storyteller, her collective work KEWERIWER explores the social context of her life and her life as a transformer of that social context. Her poetry has been featured in the 2021 Sundance Film Festival, Celebrate Micronesia Festival, and the Why It Matters civic engagement docuseries for the Hawai‘i Council for the Humanities. She is a Spring 2023 Poetry and Senses Fellow with UC Berkeley’s Art Research Center. I acknowledge the pioneers and forefathers of the Micronesian nations who had the wherewithal to fight for and claim their self-determination in the face of colonial superpower adversity, without which I would not have been granted this opportunity.

There's the Marshall Islands to the East,
and Palau to the West.
We are the COFA migrants Hawai'i's "newest wave" of immigrants.

Down south
we have Nauru and Kiribati at the end.
In the North,
we have the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands and Guam,
where America's day begins.

Yes, the Marianas are not island nations, they're U.S. territories,
but in Micronesian waters, they are a part of our inventory so although I feel hesitant
I will claim them in my story.

Because
for too long have we been claimed by foreign powers that we have forgotten who we are;
vast stretches of ocean meant to connect us now making us seem
too far.

Sometimes it is forgotten that we are one region of three—
Melanesia,
Micronesia,
Polynesia,
Pacific Island beauty—SHHHHHHHHHHH!

We have been shushed by foreign labels, "Pacific Islands" they say,
but
when foreigners say Pacific
do they really understand my way?

I come from the island of Pohnpei where
on the other side of yesterday,
on the oceans across Oceania
my ancestors would navigate.

On the other side of yesterday,
my ancestors had a vision,
of a new place they could call home—the Lagoon of Life, an island risen.
A crew of fifteen members, nine women and six men. I speak their names to life in need
of their guiding presence: Sudakono, Perenu, and the prophet Sapwkini, Langperen,
Soupelada, and his brother Soupeledi. The nine women were Lieulehle, Lienkatautik,
Lioaramenpwel, Lipwekdakalahng, Litorkini, Lisapwkini, Lipalikini, Limwetu,
Lisaramenpwel.

A canoe handcrafted by pivotal women whose power and presence, as the story goes,
would conjure wind for the voyage.
Even on my own life's journey, these women are the seed of my strength, my courage.
Along their voyage, an octopus would point them in the direction they seek.
Lo and behold, they found the exposed reef.
There they stacked rocks to build an altar in praise.
Upon a Stone Altar is the literal translation of my island's name:
POHNPEI

For upon that stone altar my island was built
so that more people could voyage to it and populate it, more still.
The clans came later calling this island their home, embedding themselves deeply rooted
in stone.
For at least two thousand years my culture has thrived. Despite decades of foreign power,
my culture is still
alive.

I walk through megalithic structures.
I pay tribute to chiefs.
Tiahk, Wahu, Soar—
traditional concepts the English language fails to describe because of its ambiguity.

I tell you the origin story of my island because here, I want to make something
irrevocably clear.

My ancestors were navigators as you've heard this story go.
As such we claim oceans and islands as contiguous homes.

We claim the identity of NAVIGATOR, and along with it the identity of IMMIGRANT.

Although I travel by plane today I feel the same turbulence.

Growing up a Pohnpeian, being a navigator was more than being able to read stars.
Being a navigator is about welcoming everyone who travels from near and/or far.

Pohnpei,
my island,
is a place for those who come.
It does not matter the color of your skin or what language rolls off your tongue.
We are NAVIGATORS,
we are IMMIGRANTS,
we are OCEANIANS,
we are ONE.

Whether you come to stay or just temporarily,
 we are obligated to treat you customarily, with
 unsolicited respect, humility, and generosity.
 That is what being a navigator, a Pohnpeian that travels means
 to me.

If I could,
 I would have stayed home to pursue a higher degree, but because of the system imposed
 on my island
 here
 is where I can find the opportunities.
 If I could I would have
 stayed
 home
 rather than being bombarded by such negativity.
 Hearing even government officials say my country is so bad we choose to come here
 because being homeless in Hawai'i is better than being rich in Micronesia
 really.

Home for me
 is the beautiful island of Pohnpei,

 where
 ever since the other side of yesterday

IMMIGRANT
 HAS BEEN MY IDENTITY
 BECAUSE
 NAVIGATION HAS BEEN MY WAY

My land, my language, my culture, my heritage is my identity, it is not negligent of one.
 This
 is what it means
 to be from where
 I
 come
 from.

Ken rohrohki irepen sapw, oh poadpoadok poadopen sapw sarawi—

Be stewards of the land and passionately breathe life into our oral history.

Home for me
 Is the beautiful island of Pohnpei
 an island built on an altar of stone

Come to all of Micronesia where you will be welcomed with open arms
because

Just like our ancestors,
you come
to find
HOME.

II. THE PREAMBLE OF THE CONSTITUTION OF THE FEDERATED STATES OF MICRONESIA (FSM)

Drafted by the Congress of Micronesia in Saipan in 1975. The Congress of Micronesia at the time included representatives from the following districts of the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands: the Northern Mariana Islands, Palau, the Marshall Islands, Pohnpei, Yap, Chuuk, and Kosrae. It would later be ratified in 1979 by the voters of Pohnpei, Yap, Chuuk, and Kosrae who chose to remain unified in their diversity. The FSM Constitution, in its role as the supreme rule of law that protects the traditions and customs of the people, still provides the other former districts the opportunity to join the federation in the future if they so choose, to realize the original dreams of the Congress of Micronesia, a unified, big ocean state that spanned the Marianas, Carolines, and Marshall Islands.

Preamble¹

WE, THE PEOPLE OF MICRONESIA, exercising our inherent sovereignty, do hereby establish this Constitution of the Federated States of Micronesia.

With this Constitution, we affirm our common wish to live together in peace and harmony, to preserve the heritage of the past, and to protect the promise of the future.

To make one nation of many islands, we respect the diversity of our cultures. Our differences enrich us. The seas bring us together, they do not separate us. Our islands sustain us, our island nation enlarges us and makes us stronger.

Our ancestors, who made their homes on these islands, displaced no other people. We, who remain, wish no other home than this. Having known war, we hope for peace. Having been divided, we wish unity. Having been ruled, we seek freedom.

Micronesia began in the days when man explored seas in rafts and canoes. The Micronesian nation is born in an age when men voyage among stars; our world itself is an island. We extend to all nations what we seek from each: peace, friendship, cooperation, and love in our common humanity. With this Constitution we, who have been the wards of other nations, become the proud guardian of our own islands, now and forever.

¹ F.S.M. CONST. pmbl.

III. 'O MAIKONESIA KĒ'IA²

As navigators it is our destiny
To at some point leave home;
in pursuit of opportunity
To create, for our descendants, a better life than we've known.

'O Maikonesia kēia, stories carried across oceans
Of fishermen
who chase ririn men.
Where we pound our food with coral and lava rocks
and make magic potions.

'O Maikonesia kēia.
When ocean peoples become landlocked
we lose our depth perception.
We can no longer see ourselves in ourselves
so we search for the oceans of reflection.

'O Maikonesia kēia.
We remember
the story laden garments we were taught to sew
By Native Hawaiian missionaries,
into our mwuhmwu, urohs, and skato.

Losing sight of histories
no longer etched in skin,
blood once drawn in liberation
now quantified and weaponized
to delegitimize and destabilize
Indigenous, sovereign nations.

'O Hawai'i kē'ia,
Where navigation found its way home;
Papa Mau reminding every single one of us
of our shared kumulipo.

'O Hawai'i kē'ia,
where navigators find themselves off course.
But together, just like the little gobi,
we can help each other return to our source.

² This poem accompanies the community mural *Oceans of Reflection*.

It is in community with each other,
 where we learn how to tell our stories again;
 finding all the things we thought we'd lost
 mirrored in our new friends.

Hands reaching across a canvas of orange and blue,
 our stories merged and emerged.
 Into each others oceans
 we found ourselves immersed.
 As tears turned water color
 baptizing lenses in ancestral saltwater,
 we found ourselves in each other.

'O Hawai'i kē'ia, this is Hawai'i.
 Where we lay our heads at night
 Where we struggle to see ourselves in ourselves
 So we look to our left and to our right

'O Hawai'i kē'ia
 Home of the ahu that looks like pei
 Stone altar
 Stone altar
 Mirrored across oceans in praise
 Of ke akua
 Of enihlap
 The struggles our ancestors endured, the same

We
 are
 each other's liberation,
 alive in this pae 'āina
 we
 will
 free
 each other
 again