

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: PICTURING ISLAND BODIES UNDER US
IMPERIALISM

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Since the end of World War II, the US has maintained the naval occupation of Okinawa, a small island off the coast of Japan. Across the globe in Puerto Rico the US operated what was at one point the largest naval station in the world during World War II and through the Cold War until ceasing operations in 2001. Islanders in Vieques, Puerto Rico face alarming cancer rates, speculated as due to pollution from offshore explosives. Women of Okinawa experience recurrent acts of sexual violence at the hands of US servicemen. In both archipelagos, public protests against US occupation have disputed land ownership and environmental damages. Taking a transnational approach to the survival of US imperial violence, this paper examines how contemporary video artists, Okinawan Chikako Yamashiro, Puerto Rico-based duo Allora & Calzadilla, and Puerto Rican Beatriz Santiago Muñoz picture island bodies both human and geographic. In *Seaweed Woman* (2008) by Yamashiro, *Under Discussion* (2005) by Allora & Calzadilla, and *Post-Military Cinema* (2014) by Santiago Muñoz, liminality, as a space between life and death—a condition particular to colonized bodies, is pictured as an

aesthetic and durational refusal of death and destruction to the island body. The condition of liminality is portrayed through visual and sonic engagements of hyperrealism, that is the confusion between the artists' reproduced images/sounds with the real experiences of island bodies. In *Post-Military Cinema*, liminality is used by the artist to produce a repossession of the island body, and in all artworks, to picture resistance. Broadly, this comparative study challenges notions of "American Art" and reflects on how US imperial ideology enacts violence, but via the creation of binary oppositions creates liminal spaces from which the island body resists and survives.

PICTURING ISLAND BODIES UNDER US IMPERIALISM

By

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Table of Contents

Table of Contents	ii
Disclaimer	iii
List of Figures	iv
Introduction	1
Historical Overview	5
Liminal Island Bodies	12
Hyperreal Island Bodies	23
(Re)possessing Island Bodies	31
Epilogue: Binaries and Borders	43
References	47

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List of Figures

- Figure 1. *Paz en Vieques*
- Figure 2. Vicinity Map (detail) from Naval Facilities Engineering Command Atlantic Division, *U.S. Naval Complex Roosevelt Roads Puerto Rico Master Plan*, Paul Schember, RR-0057-1.02-01/01/88, 1988.
- Figure 3. U.S. Military Bases in Okinawa Today from Okinawa Prefectural Government, *What Okinawa Wants you to Understand about the U.S. Military Bases*, March 2018.
- Figure 4. Chikako Yamashiro, *Seaweed Woman*, 2008. Installation at White Rainbow Gallery, London.
- Figure 5. *Seaweed Woman*. Installation at White Rainbow Gallery, London.
- Figure 6. *Seaweed Woman*
- Figure 7. *Seaweed Woman* (0:00:55)
- Figure 8. *Seaweed Woman* (0:03:16)
- Figure 9. *Seaweed Woman* (0:03:45)
- Figure 10. *Seaweed Woman* (0:05:44)
- Figure 11. Allora & Calzadilla, *Under Discussion*, 2005. Compilation of video stills.
- Figure 12. Allora & Calzadilla, *Half Mast/Full Mast*, 2010
- Figure 13. *Under Discussion*
- Figure 14. *Under Discussion*
- Figure 15. Allora & Calzadilla, *Half Mast/Full Mast*, 2010
- Figure 16. Community Center Complex from Naval Facilities Engineering Command Atlantic Division, *U.S. Naval Complex Roosevelt Roads Puerto Rico Master Plan*, Paul Schember, RR-0057-1.02-01/01/88, 1988.
- Figure 17. Former baseball field and stands at Roosevelt Roads site

- Figure 18. El Coqui Theater ca. 2002
- Figure 19. Entrance to El Coqui Theater ca. 2020
- Figure 20. Allora & Calzadilla, *Returning of a Sound*, 2004
- Figure 21. Map of areas pictured in *Returning of a Sound*
- Figure 22. Beatriz Santiago Muñoz, *Post-Military Cinema*, 2014 (0:01:32)
- Figure 23. *Post-Military Cinema* (0:02:15)
- Figure 24. Francisco Oller, *Hacienda La Fortuna*, 1885
- Figure 25. *Post-Military Cinema* (0:06:32)
- Figure 26. Francisco Oller, *Hacienda Aurora*, 1898-99
- Figure 27. *Post-Military Cinema* (0:03:24)
- Figure 28. Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre, *1996 seats, opened as H.C. Miner's Newark Theatre as a vaudeville house (1886), remodeled by architect Thomas Lamb in Adam style (1917), starting showing movies and renamed Paramount theater (1932), closed (1986), lobby used as retail PARAMOUNT THEATER, NEWARK, NJ, 2011, 2011*
- Figure 29. *Romance Tropical* (1934) Movie Poster
- Figure 30. *Post-Military Cinema*, (0:10:23)
- Figure 31. Beatriz Santiago Muñoz, *10 years*, 2014

Introduction

In my family home hangs a screenprint by an unidentified Puerto Rican artist in which a young boy wishfully holds up a flag reading “Paz en Vieques” (Peace in Vieques) (**Fig. 1**).¹ It is through this artwork that I, at a young age, became informed of the United States military occupation of Vieques, Puerto Rico and the injustices it imposed on the island. This fraught history conflicts with the great American narrative that, through history books and museological canon, touts ideals of democracy, equality, and freedom as central to the nation’s practices and global role. In attending to artistic production from the edges of US empire, such as *Paz en Vieques*, I present a counter-narrative to this American mythology.

While I launched this study with pointed attention to examples of Puerto Rican artistic production under US imperialism, I draw further comparisons to work from another site of US military occupation: Okinawa, Japan. Through a transnational approach, I analyze three video-based artworks that varyingly picture island bodies under US occupation: *Seaweed Woman* (2008) by Chikako Yamashiro (b.1976, Naha, Okinawa, Japan); *Under Discussion* (2005) by Puerto Rico based artist-duo Allora & Calzadilla (members Jennifer Allora b. 1974, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Guillermo Calzadilla b. 1971, Havana Cuba); and *Post-Military Cinema* (2014) by Beatriz Santiago Muñoz (b. 1972, San Juan, Puerto Rico). There are many locations impacted by US imperialism, but a transnational comparison between Puerto Rican island bodies and Okinawan island bodies illuminates unexpected commonalities. Both

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, translations are mine.

islands had been colonized prior to US occupation--Puerto Rico by Spain, and Okinawa, by Japan.² In “Reimagining Islands: Notes on Selected Works by Oh Hoaji, Soni Kum, and Yamashiro Chikako,” art historian Rebecca Jennison references Satoshi Ukai's call for "new and careful readings of ongoing conditions of 'double colonization' [on] islands linked by the shared experience of having been colonized by Japan that continue to face neo-colonial pressure from military superpowers which in turn are also continents and states (such as the US bases in Okinawa)."³ In this thesis, I answer Ukai's call and extend the notion of "double colonization" beyond the islands colonized by Japan to understand the US imperial effect in multiple contexts. In Okinawa *and* Puerto Rico, the trauma of the islands' histories as colonies of Japan and Spain, respectively, are doubled by the trauma of US occupation, a "double colonization" worth studying for what it can reveal about the effects of doubled and enduring imperial harm.

The subject of each video is the “island body,” which I define as dually the human body (the islander) and the geographic body of land that is the island itself. This connection is indeed related to the many (sometimes constructive and sometimes problematic) conceptual linkages between humans and land in the discourses on and of Indigenous bodies, art, and culture.⁴ Notwithstanding, my argument does not rely

² Under General Douglas MacArthur, the US occupied Japan after the end of World War II. When sovereignty was returned to Japan in 1951 under the San Francisco Peace Treaty, the Ryuku Islands, including Okinawa, remained under occupation until 1972 when it was returned to Japan. At the end of the Spanish-American War, the Treaty of Paris of 1898 transferred rule over Guam, the Philippines, and Puerto Rico to the US. In 1947, Japan gained its constitution, and in 1952, the US granted Puerto Rico a constitution. Both constitutions were primarily drafted by the United States.

³ Rebecca Jennison, “Reimagining Islands: Notes on Selected Works by Oh Hoaji, Soni Kum, and Yamashiro Chikako,” *Asian Diasporic Visual Cultures and the Americas* 3, no. 1–2 (2017): 156, <https://doi.org/10.1163/23523085-00302008>.

⁴ Examples of the problematic include early modern decorative map cartouches produced by Dutch, British, and European map makers that visually linked Indigenous Caribbean island bodies to mapped

on an essentializing homogenization of island bodies—as nations equally impacted by imperial oppressions or even as a group of alike individuals that make up each nation. Other, non-military-based forms of US pseudo-occupation such as tourism, political interference, and agricultural, industrial, or trade-based occupations are beyond the scope of this essay. Nonetheless, I present a study of US military occupations of doubly colonized islands as a framework for understanding global imperial conditions and expanding transnational solidarity. In the following case studies, I draw upon the scholarship of art historian and curator Taína Caragol who considers how contemporary artists engaged in the subject of US empire can expand the American art genre.⁵ This framework, to which I adhere to, is one which considers empire as a central aspect of any study of the US, be it history or art.

Each artist here engages video, a medium that not only distinctly produces the hyperreal (as closely reproducing the real in image, sound, and movement) but represents a strategic choice for island artists. Practicing where physical art objects are endangered by the effects of climate change (i.e., hurricanes, tsunamis, extreme heat, rising seas), these artists produce virtual documents that survive through duplication via digital file copy and reach across borders via the internet. Video's

territory, equating these bodies to the resources that the land contained and that the European colonizers sought to exploit. The most constructive examples of these connections are drawn from the communities they seek to represent and maintain considerable appreciation for both the similarities and differences between various indigenous cultures.

⁵ For the forthcoming Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery exhibition, *1898: Imperial Visions and Revisions* (working title), curated by Caragol and Kate Clarke Lemay, Caragol promises a chapter in its catalog dedicated to highlighting contemporary artists engaged in the subject of US empire (in relation to Guam, U.S. Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico, Hawai'i, the Philippines, for example). Significant is her treatment of the subject as worthy of inclusion in a museum deeply engaged in telling the story of the US. I worked with Caragol in summer of 2021 as the Catto curatorial intern for this exhibition. Taína Caragol and Kate Clarke Lemay, "Imperial Visions and Revisions," *Bully Pulpit, Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 6, no. 1 (Spring 2020), <https://doi.org/10.24926/24716839.10096>.

reproducibility and ease of transfer hold the potential to upload the presence of island bodies into the global collective memory and spread like a (computer) virus.

Historically overlooked, and at times strategically silenced, island perspectives have been systematically excluded from international archives, large collecting institutions, empirical historiographies, and the art historical canon. These exclusions directly stem from Western bias, white supremacy, and patriarchy rooted in the imperial expansion of Europe and are compounded by Europe's successor as global power: the neo-imperial US. In foregrounding the documentation of island bodies, particularly island bodies under US imperialism, video resists such exclusionary practices and simultaneously corrupts the imperial system itself.

Following a brief historical overview of US imperial forces in Okinawa and Puerto Rico, I present three case studies that illustrate these island bodies under occupation. The discussion of *Seaweed Woman* by Yamashiro demonstrates the picturing of liminality, specifically the liminal island body under US pseudo-occupation between the poles of sovereignty and dispossession. *Under Discussion* by Allora & Calzadilla exemplifies the role of hyperreality, which I define as the artist's reproduction of real, abstract conditions of the Viequense (Puerto Ricans from Vieques) through a narrative-based performance captured on video. Finally, an analysis of *Post-Military Cinema* by Santiago Muñoz reveals how the hyperreal liminal island body can repossess formerly occupied lands by subverting an imperial desiring gaze often turned towards island bodies. Ultimately, I contend these forms of picturing constitute a transnational resistance to a neo-imperial force of the US birthed during World War II and active to this day.

Historical Overview

The Cold War, a monumental instance of binary ideology, was the powerful driver for US global domination post-World War II. While US imperialism has its roots in its eighteenth-century founding, the Soviet threat offered justification for an imperial project that has resulted in what Daniel Immerwahr, in *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States*, refers to as the "Greater United States," a "hidden empire" with about 750 military bases in at least 80 countries around the world.⁶ While situated almost entirely antipodally, Okinawa and Puerto Rico function similarly in how they each continue to serve US (Cold War) interests. The US military presence doubles down on the dispossession that each island, previously colonized, endures. The geographic, environmental, political, social, physical, and emotional impacts of this enduring dispossession on Okinawan and Puerto Rican island bodies are what draws them together.

While grassroots activists have drawn connections between islands such as Okinawa and Puerto Rico under pseudo-US military occupation, due attention is needed to artistic production at these edges of US empire. Recent art historical scholarship has opened avenues for such transnational dialogue within the field.⁷

⁶ Daniel Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire: a History of the Greater United States* (New York: Picador, 2020); and Mohammed Hussein and Mohammed Haddad. "Infographic: US Military Presence around the World," *Aljazeera*, September 10, 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/9/10/infographic-us-military-presence-around-the-world-interactive#:~:text=The%20US%20controls%20about%20750,the%20next%2010%20countries%20combined.>

⁷ Notably, this includes the International Women's Network Against Militarism which comprises "women activists, policy-makers, teachers, and students" from the peripheries of the US empire: Guahan (Guam), Hawai'i, Japan, Okinawa, The Philippines, Puerto Rico, South Korea, and includes supporters from the continental US. The network turns its focus to shared issues including, "military violence, sexual abuse, and trafficking; problems arising from the expansion of US military operations and bases; the health effects of environmental contamination caused by preparations for war," among

Joseph R. Hartman's edited volume *Imperial Islands: Art, Architecture, and Visual Experience in the US Insular Empire After 1898* acts as an art historical and visual culture-focused follow-up to Immerwahr's *How to Hide an Empire*: both are critical pieces of scholarship that contribute to an understanding of the formation of US empire during and following the years of the Spanish-American War (1898) and the annexation of Caribbean and Pacific islands.⁸ More attention is also needed to the contemporary visual rhetoric of resistance and reclamation among artworks from these islands, as the aftershocks of these past and active occupations continue to be felt by island bodies today.

Puerto Rico served a key Cold War function due to its proximity to the Soviet stronghold of Cuba and to the Panama Canal, which it protected from enemy control. After the Spanish-American War, the Treaty of Paris granted the US control of Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines, all of which became sites for US military bases. In Puerto Rico, shortly after the annexation, naval exercises began in the waters of Culebra, another small island off its coast. In the following years, a naval station was built on Culebra (1904); a naval base, later named Roosevelt Roads, was ordered for the area of Ceiba on the main island (1940); and the naval training range in Vieques was opened (1941). While a series of local anti-military protests forced the closing of the Culebra station in 1971, the acreage of military installations in Puerto Rico in the 1980s remained large totaling 72,634 acres held by the Army, National Guard, Navy,

others. International Women's Network Against Militarization, February 15, 2015, <http://iwnam.org/about/>.

⁸ Joseph R. Hartman, *Imperial Islands: Art, Architecture, and Visual Experience in the US Insular Empire after 1898* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2022); and Immerwahr, *Hide an Empire*.

and Air Force (**Fig. 2**).⁹ On Vieques, seventy-six percent of the land was restricted to the US military and unavailable for civilian use. These installments, along with more than fifty others in Guantánamo Bay, Antigua, the Bahamas, Bermuda, Trinidad, Tobago, and the US Virgin Islands, transposed what began as a distinctly island and resource-focused imperial expansion of the US to the preservation of power in the Caribbean basin.¹⁰ This presence sought to secure the nation and its allies from Nazi threat in World War II; train its fleets in new tactics in response to communist threats in Korea; secure Panama Canal centered trade routes from Soviet control during the Cold War; and position US nuclear forces close to a Soviet-backed Cuba.¹¹

After World War II, the United States established a naval base on the island of Okinawa, securing a stronghold in East Asia during the Cold War that remains operational today. However, the US was not the first to occupy this island. Okinawa, the largest of the Ryukyu Islands, is home to a unique ethnic group called the Ryukyuan. The unified Ryukyu Kingdom, dating back to 1429, was invaded by Japanese forces in 1609 and officially annexed by the Japanese Empire under Meiji rule in 1879.¹² The Ryuku archipelago, stretching from southern Japan to Taiwan in the southern gateway between the Philippine Sea and the East China Sea, was one of many areas colonized by Emperor Meiji who rapidly expanded the empire during his

⁹ Humberto García Muñiz, "US Military Installations in Puerto Rico: An Essay on Their Role and Purpose," *Caribbean Studies* 24, no. ¾ (1991): 85. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25613040>.

¹⁰ Immerwahr notes that the US acquisition of islands began with a large number of unpopulated small Caribbean islands for the harvesting of guano, used as fertilizer to grow food for a booming US population. US interest later expanded to larger islands after a young Theodore Roosevelt, inspired by the 1890 treatise, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History* by Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan, influenced President William McKinley to enter the Spanish-American war. Immerwahr, *Hide an Empire*, 47-70.

¹¹ Muñiz, "U.S. Military Installments."

¹² George H. Kerr, *Okinawa, the History of an Island People* (Rutland, VT: C.E. Tuttle, 1958).

rule. The island of Okinawa, now a part of the Okinawa prefecture of Japan, would remain under Japanese rule until a major turning point of World War II: the Battle of Okinawa (1945). A notoriously bloody conflict lasting eighty-two days, the Battle of Okinawa claimed the lives of approximately half of the Okinawan population. Civilian deaths greatly outnumbered those of the military due starvation, illness, and even Japanese-forced mass suicide. It was after this battle that the US controlled Okinawa under military occupation until 1950 through a more formally organized “civil administration” through 1972, maintaining a strategic presence in Asia against Soviet and Chinese communist influence and during the Korean and Vietnam Wars.

The Okinawa Prefectural Peace Memorial Museum, a memorial to the Battle of Okinawa, clearly summarizes the transition from Japanese to US occupation: “Okinawans directly experienced the absurdity of war and atrocities it inevitably brings about. This war experience is at the very core of what is popularly called the ‘Okinawan Heart,’ a resilient yet strong attitude to life that Okinawan people developed as they struggled against the pressures of many years of US military control.”¹³ Despite ending an oppressive Japanese rule, the establishment of US military bases in Okinawa for the purposes of building hard power and maintaining wartime outposts made the US presence particularly unpalatable for a population so profoundly opposed to war. The US returned the island to Japan in 1972, but despite Okinawan opposition Japan allowed the US to continue to expand their military bases; in 2017, the US occupied approximately seventy-two square miles, or around

¹³ “The Basic Concept of the Okinawa Prefectural Peace Memorial Museum,” Okinawa Prefectural Peace Memorial Museum, April 1, 2000, <http://www.peace-museum.okinawa.jp/english/>.

eight percent of the land in the Okinawa Prefecture overall, including fourteen and a half percent of the land on the island of Okinawa (**Fig. 3**).¹⁴ Thus, even after the end of the official occupation in 1972, the US presence remains significant. The “Okinawan Heart” and the island’s anti-war stance remain as the continued US military presence, which has had damaging impacts locally as well.¹⁵

In both Okinawa and Puerto Rico, US military installations used island locations as sites for weapons, bombs, and training experiments that led to immeasurable environmental damages as well to the physical harm of residents, a harm that lingers to this day. In Japan, the infamous Bikini Atoll Lucky Dragon Incident (1954) brought awareness to the harmful effects of bomb fallout when fishermen of the Lucky Dragon boat were irradiated, resulting in one death and in cancer in the others who were on board. In Vieques, cancer rates are 27% higher than that of mainland Puerto Rico, a disparity thought to be related to the presence of residual carcinogenic weapons materials.¹⁶ In 1999, civilian David Sanes Rodriguez was killed in Vieques by a test bomb.¹⁷ Okinawa saw 676 accidents involving US aircraft, including the 2004 incident in which a US Marine Corps helicopter crashed into Okinawa International University, Ginowan City.¹⁸ The sexual violence against

¹⁴ “What Okinawa Wants You to Understand about the U.S. Military Bases,” Okinawa Prefectural Government, March 2018, <http://dc-office.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/E-all.pdf>.

¹⁵ Okinawa Prefectural Peace Memorial Museum.

¹⁶ Valeria Pelet, “There’s a Health Crisis on This Puerto Rican Island, but It’s Impossible to Prove Why It’s Happening,” *The Atlantic* (Atlantic Media Company, September 3, 2016), <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/09/vieques-invisible-health-crisis/498428/>.

¹⁷ Associated Press, “Navy Attributes Fatal Bombing To Mistakes,” *New York Times*, August 3, 1999, sec. A, p.12, <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/08/03/us/navy-attributes-fatal-bombing-to-mistakes.html>.

¹⁸ “Base-Related Data,” Okinawa Prefectural Government Washington D.C. Office, accessed February 20, 2022, <https://dc-office.org/basedata>; Okinawan artist Mao Ishikawa (b. 1953), who deserves similar attention to her commentary on US occupation in Okinawa, rushed to the site of the helicopter accident in 2014 without her usual camera equipment. Using her cellphone and instant cameras (brought to her onsite by a friend who she asked to quickly purchase some nearby), she captured a series of gripping

Okinawan women by US forces is an ongoing problem: in 1955, Sergeant Isaac J. Hurt raped and murdered six-year-old Okinawan Yumiko Nagayama, and in 2016 marine Kenneth Franklin Shinzato raped and murdered 20-year-old Okinawan Rina Shimabukuro. While these events are the most violent and well-known accounts of sexual violence against Okinawans, they exclude other, more minor sexual offenses and the unreported infractions that occur in the context of sex-work catering to US servicemen.¹⁹ Finally, both islands have been negatively impacted by polluted sea life and diminished fisheries.²⁰ Without question, Okinawan and Puerto Rican island bodies remain impacted by US military forces through residual toxic contamination and direct assault by weapons and sexual force. For these reasons and more, these US naval bases have both been met with opposition by anti-base and anti-imperial movements, led by a host of organizations including International Women's Network Against Militarism, International Network Against Foreign Military Bases, Okinawa Women Act Against Military Violence, Hawai'i Okinawa Alliance, Okinawa Peace Appeal, Vieques Libre, Artists for Peace, Committee for the Rescue and Development of Vieques, the Puerto Rican Independence Party, Vieques Women's

images documenting the immediate damage and military response, which was to block civilian access to the university area. Mao Ishikawa, *Fences, Okinawa* (Tokyo: Mirai-sha Publishers, 2010), 76.

¹⁹ Tomomi Tomita, "Okinawan Women's Civic Group Chronicles Sex Crimes by U.S. Military," *The Japan Times*, March 18, 2021, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2021/03/18/national/social-issues/okinawa-women-military-violence/>; and Anonymous, "The Journey of Recovering from Gender-Based Violence: The Ecstasy of Triumph and the Agony of Defeat," January 4, 2011, <https://www.humiliationstudies.org/documents/Anonymous.pdf>.

²⁰ Jon Mitchell, "FOIA Documents Reveal Agent Orange Dioxin, Toxic Dumps, Fish Kills on Okinawa Base. Two Veterans Win Compensation, Many More Denied," *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, Vol. 13, Issue 40, no. 1, October 5, 2015; and Marius Palz, "Okinawan Coral Politics, Henoko Base Construction and a Japanese Political Strategy of Ignorance," *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, Vol. 19, Issue 24, no.2, December 15, 2021; and David Griffith and Pizzini Valdés Manuel, "Roads Less Traveled: Proletarianization and Its Discontents," in *Fishers at Work, Workers at Sea: A Puerto Rican Journey through Labor and Refuge* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002).

Alliance, and more. The artists' voices, in each of the three works I describe, contribute to these movements, and picture a form of resistance. While not an act of protest or civil disobedience, this artist formed resistance comprises the documentation of the effects of imperialism on island bodies, combatting the erasure of such stories through systematic exclusion from international media attention and sufficient academic study.

Liminal Island Bodies

In *Liminality and the Modern: Living Through the In-Between*, Danish anthropologist and social scientist Bjørn Thomassen defines liminality as “refer[ing] to moments or periods of transition... opening the way to novelty and imagination, construction and destruction... In liminality, the very distinction between structure and agency ceases to make sense; and yet, in the hyper-reality of liminality, ...meaning-formation take[s] form.”²¹ For Okinawan and Puerto Rican island bodies, it is US neo-imperialism that has distorted just structures of agency in the form of ownership and autonomy and produced a liminal state between subjugation and sovereignty. Engaging the liminal, Chikako Yamashiro in *Seaweed Woman*, and Allora & Calzadilla in *Under Discussion*, picture the islander in or on island coastal waters. Yamashiro and Allora & Calzadilla both employ hyperrealism, which aligns with Thomassen’s description of liminality. While the meaning of hyperreality has been transposed by many scholars, in this case, the hyperreal is the visual representation of the real conditions of islanders and islands through imaginative performances such as the artist as a “Seaweed Woman,” and in Allora & Calzadilla’s video a fisherman who drives an upside-down table through water. In these imaginative performances, the fictional narrative is a more accurate representation of the real experiences of island bodies than what may otherwise be documented in traditional media.

²¹ Bjørn Thomassen, “Into Liminality,” in *Liminality and the Modern Living through the in-Between* (London: Routledge, 2018), 1.

Especially if the viewer equates the islander with the island—a body also in or on water, this hyperreal visual rhetoric draws attention to the ways in which US occupation has impacted the island body. Through a visual analysis of *Seaweed Woman*, I examine the politically liminal position imposed on the Okinawan body; the construction of binaries and borders that create the liminal Okinawan; the gendered liminal position; and the liminality between life and death in relation to the livelihoods of Okinawans threatened by US occupation. Through the picturing of a hyperreal *Seaweed Woman*, a mythical stand-in for the Okinawan island body, Yamashiro calls attention to and draws power from the liminal space occupied by this body.

Chikako Yamashiro, a native Okinawan, graduated with a bachelor's degree in oil painting from the Okinawa Prefectural University of the Arts in 1999, by which time she had already begun to move away from painting to performance and video-based methods. Her works have been exhibited globally in solo shows hosted in London and Singapore and in group shows in San Francisco (*From Generation to Generation: Inherited Memory and Contemporary Art*, 2016-17) and Tel Aviv (*Beyond Hiroshima: The Return of the Repressed Wartime Memory, Performativity and the Documentary in Contemporary Japanese Photography and Video Art*, 2015), among others. While she has been exhibited by mainland Japanese museums such as the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography and the Mori Art Museum, the museum that has most frequently displayed her work is the Okinawa Prefectural Art Museum in Naha, where she was born. Her oeuvre functions as a long-term investigation into the complex relationships between past and present in Okinawa, its

history of colonial violence, and its continued resistance. Her consistent engagement with the island of Okinawa not only centers the experiences of Okinawans, but centers the artist herself as mediator, highlighting the difficulties that arise with such an endeavor.

Her 2008 work *Seaweed Woman* comprises a looped film (0:7:15) and eight Lambda chromogenic prints (**Fig. 4**). As exhibited in her solo show *Shapeshifter* at White Rainbow gallery in London (2018), the video is projected to the left of the photographs, which are mounted at varying heights, mimicking the shape of a small wave (**Fig. 5**). The sound of the video, discussed later, is of repeated human breath and fills the gallery space, allowing the viewer to hear the soundtrack while engaging both the video and the photographic components. The photographs are shot from above and look upon the artist from the chest up; her body is positioned diagonally in the frame as she floats in clear water amidst a mass of vivid green seaweed. In some photographs her eyes are closed and her face lies fully or partially submerged just under the surface of the water. In others, her face, partially above water, is covered in seaweed as she stares emptily above. In the second to last in the row of eight, her head rises fully out of the water, eyes looking intently into the camera with seaweed forming a beard around her mouth (**Fig. 6**).

The video's rhetoric, with its handheld cinematography and accompanying breathy soundtrack, portrays the entire narrative from the point of view of the artist in water. Viewing the video alongside the photographs, the viewer easily connects this point of view to the pictured artist, or "Seaweed Woman" as the title suggests. The narrative arc parallels the order of the photographs displayed on the wall to its right,

where her face, submerged partially or fully under the water, finally emerges in the last image. A handheld camera captures views of the area from the artist's position in water, dipping under frequently and surfacing to multiple vignettes as waves splash against the camera lens. These scenes, shot at various locations around Okinawa and its peripheral islands including beaches and resorts, include visions of areas not yet claimed by military or private ownership ("designated sites of reclamation," in the words of the artist).²² Her quick and frequent video edits from one image to the next mimic the rhythm of ocean waves as the narrative content bobs in and out of view.

In an interview, Yamashiro explains the origin of the Seaweed Woman, who first emerged from an interest in mirrors and view of the self and evolved into a character embodied by the artist. "Seaweed woman was born, first appearing in still photos," she recalled. "It felt like I had the eyes, the vision, of someone other than myself."²³ Through performance and video, in *Seaweed Woman* and throughout her oeuvre, she practices and documents an attempt to embody Okinawan history and experience in a form of hyperreal self-portraiture, traversing the boundary between individual and collective to picture yet another form of liminality. I will refer to the perspective of the camera, of the artist, and of Seaweed Woman as a character and as a stand-in for the Okinawan body, interchangeably.

In the video, the camera/artist/Seaweed Woman continuously dips underwater and re-emerges with the force and rhythm of the waves. Like the waves, the images

²² Yamashiro lists the Awase flatlands, Mokuninhama Shore Connivance (artist's term) in Urasoe, areas around the Naha military port, Sesoko Beach, Kise Beach, and Henoko as film locations. Chikako Yamashiro, DVD Interview, in *Still Hear the Wound: toward an Asia, Politics, and Art to Come* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, East Asia Program, 2015).

²³ Ibid.

are choppy, and a slow shutter speed blurs and confuses the definition of the waves, much like water in the eyes would do (**Fig. 7**). In the first eighteen seconds of the film, a distant horizon of mountains can be made out, but it soon disappears under the waves. In succession, the waves hit the camera from a forward direction, then from the left, the right, and above, the artist dipping under the water after each directional force is applied. When considering multidirectional forces on the island body, this author reads the waves as representative of the multidirectional forces on the Okinawan people: Japan as colonizer, the US as military occupier, and the current conservative Japanese government catering to the desires of the US.²⁴ The waves push the artist under the water. The soundscape, a continued rhythm of water splash and troubled breath, carries throughout the film, and implies that the artist, the Okinawan body, is barely managing to keep alive against the force of the waves, and the forces of the imperial political and occupational powers.²⁵

The artist emerges from the water looking up to find a Japanese Coast Guard boat, the same vessel that enforces US Marine exclusion zones in Okinawan waters

²⁴ Former Prime Minister of Japan, Abe Shinzō, who served in office 2006-2007 and 2012-2020, is a member of Nippon Kaigi, the largest conservative, far-right lobby. In 2019 he continued in support of the relocation of a US military base in Okinawa despite a vote of rejection by over 70% of voting Okinawans. Justin McCurry, “Okinawa Referendum Rejects New US Military Base but Abe Likely to Press On,” *The Guardian* (Guardian News and Media, February 25, 2019), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/feb/24/okinawa-referendum-rejects-new-us-military-base-but-abe-likely-to-press-on>.

²⁵ This reading of the artist’s body as “the Okinawan body” is informed by Yamashiro’s frequent performance in video works in which she attempts to relate her body to the Okinawan people at-large: lip-synching to the words of an Okinawan elder and projecting his image onto her face in *Your voice came out through my throat* (2009); and performances documented in the series *OKINAWA TOURIST* (2004) in which she enacts cliché images of Okinawan people such as dancing a traditional Okinawan dance often performed for tourists or eating American ice cream in front of a US military base. She has stated, “I have used photography and video for works using my body and other people’s bodies because I believe that they can fuse the border between reality and imagination as well as generate multiple meanings between the image and the audience.” This interpretation is one such meaning. Chikako Yamashiro, “Yamashiro Chikako,” Tokyo Arts and Space, March 18, 2022, <https://www.tokyoartsandspace.jp/en/creator/index/Y/1476.html>.

(Fig. 8).²⁶ The guards on the boat note the artist's presence, and one guard directs a camera her way. The artist dips again underwater and emerges to view the Japanese Coast Guard approaching a second boat, that of the anti-base resisters who occupy water areas, one of whom dons a fishing cap. The scene cuts to the Coast Guard intervening as one of the protestors aboard, an older man, makes eye contact with the camera in a glance. The artist's gaze then turns to the seafloor, where what should be covered in coral reefs and sea life is barren (Fig. 9). The camera finds and focuses on a tread, or piece of equipment, long and stretched across the seafloor like a barrier or border, covered in sediment. The image articulates the construction of borders imposed on the natural island body, both physical, as in the borders placed by U.S forces to separate bases from the rest of the island, and political, as in Okinawa's status between Japanese and US rule.

Rising from the water again, the artist turns her gaze to the sky, floating and bouncing in the waves. In a repetition of submersion and emersion, a succession of flashes builds tension - of another boat and city coastline, a village coastline, shorelines polluted with discarded equipment, snorkelers and beachgoers (Fig. 10). As the repetitive sound of the artist's breath seems to skip a beat, she is once again submerged in the water. This time the sound of her breath ceases as if finally overcome by external forces; yet it returns once again as the artist emerges for the final time. The sound of the breath is no longer unnatural but normal in its rhythm: with this edit, the viewer is brought out of a hypnotic state into a present reality. At

²⁶ Rupert Wingfield-Hayes, "Where Japanese Fight a US Military Base with Kayaks," BBC News (BBC, April 28, 2015), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-32476954>.

this moment, the artist's gaze is turned to the sky and the underwater soundscape ceases, implying a body that has either survived the forces of the waves and resisted drowning, or has drowned and is reborn.

This narrative of survival continues in the accompanying 8 photographs taken in the waters of Henoko, one of the sites of the US base. The last of these pictures Yamashiro with a beard of wet green seaweed around her mouth and piled upon her chin. Yamashiro notes that she imagined the character of Seaweed Woman donning a beard of seaweed from the outset. Alongside the video's soundscape in which the Seaweed Woman struggles to breathe, the pictured seaweed can be read as suffocating the artist around the airway and as if the mass of sea vegetation that has been coughed out of her lungs. Note that mozuko, a seaweed farmed by Okinawans for processing in factories, is native to Okinawa. Mozuko is sold as food, but most relevantly here, as a cancer treatment. In a 2015 study, researchers at the University of Tasmania observed that fucoidan, found in brown seaweed such as mozuko, can not only destroy cancerous cells but also prevent chemotherapy and radiation toxicity.²⁷ Reading the images with these connections in mind, and considering the seaweed *woman* equipped with a masculine gender performance (the donning of a beard), meaning is formed in the liminal state between binaries. Yamashiro forms meaning in-between the seaweed as a harm (as suffocating) and seaweed as an aid (as cancer treatment), in-between seaweed woman as feminine and seaweed woman as masculine. Okinawa and Okinawans occupy a position in-between such binaries:

²⁷ Farzaneh Atashrazm, et al. "Fucoidan and cancer: a multifunctional molecule with anti-tumor potential," *Marine drugs*, vol. 13,4 (2015): 2327-46, doi:10.3390/md13042327.

farmers who harvest seaweed with the potential to treat cancer expose themselves to waters now toxic from US military experiments; the islanders are Japanese citizens yet a separate ethnic group; land and waters are Okinawan yet occupied by an external force; a Japan conceptualized as feminized by the US enacts a masculinized violence on Okinawa.²⁸ Yamashiro thus reveals the absurdity of binary distinctions via such gender play and reclaims an occupational power of meaning-formation and truth-production in this liminal space.

Yamashiro dwells on this absurdity in her hyperreal picturing of the island body as the mythical Seaweed Woman, occupying the fluid space of coastal waters. While a border is drawn to separate US occupied areas on Okinawa's coast, water as a property cannot be divided, simultaneously occupying both sides, the in-between, moving from one side to the other with no way of distinguishing a part from the whole and always between two points of land. Furthermore, Seaweed Woman's breath, consistent and indicative of survival, yet strained and indicative of drowning, expands picturing to sonification of a liminal state, one between life and death. The water pushes and pulls Seaweed Woman between the overwhelming forces of the Japanese government and US occupation. As a creature tied to the water and as a stand-in for the Okinawan, Seaweed Woman dually threatens the binary system of borders and is subject to its devastating occultation, and even fatal, effects. In this

²⁸ Lee Chonghwa and Choi Jinseok, "Specters of East Asia: Okinawa, Taiwan, and Korea," in *Still Hear the Wound: toward an Asia, Politics, and Art to Come* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University, East Asia Program, 2015); The image of a feminized Japan that has prostituted itself to the United States has been explored by male Japanese artists such as Hiroshi Nakamura, Kikuji Yamashita, and Takashi Murakami.

manner, Seaweed Woman, as an island body, defies empire in its occupation of the liminal.

The performance of an island body by Yamashiro, occupying and resisting from the space between life and death, demonstrates the latent power of the liminal position. Yamashiro's performance runs parallel to that of Puerto Rican island bodies as described by Latina/Latino studies scholar Sandra Ruiz. While concerning island bodies situated far from Okinawa geographically, the positionality Ruiz describes is one that is particularly relevant to Okinawan island bodies due to their similar colonial and political histories as occupied islands of the US, providing a useful framework through which to consider the performative *Seaweed Woman*. Ruiz discusses the "Rican" body, enduring a colonialism doubled under US rule in Puerto Rico, as situated in a liminal space: not living, not dying, but always on the precipice of death.²⁹ Ruiz points to water's symbolic liminal quality as "a fixture of Ricanness—in between cultures, nations, and a colony and colonizer, water persists as a weapon, a situation warfare, and an all-encompassing deathtrap between worlds."³⁰ This "fixture of Ricanness" is also one of the colonized island body, and it is this fixture, the liminal qualities of water and the "all-encompassing deathtrap," that Yamashiro employs to articulate the Okinawan position, placing the island body, her own, in the liminal space (water) that functions as the cause of death for Seaweed Woman.

²⁹ Sandra Ruiz, *Ricanness: Enduring Time in Anticolonial Performance* (New York: New York University Press, 2019).

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

Yamashiro exercises her resistance from this liminal space of being-toward-death, freeing the island body by drowning its stand-in, Seaweed Woman, and then being re-born. Relying on the theories of Frantz Fanon and Martin Heidegger, Ruiz describes Puerto Rican endurance of “being-toward-death...[as] not a daunting manifestation; it’s an insurgent alternative to a limited existence.”³¹ This insurgent alternative, or liminal space, offers the colonized island body a site from which to act in resistance. Yamashiro’s performance mirrors that of the 1954 political demonstration by Puerto Rican Nationalist Dolores “Lolita” Lebrón Sotamayor, as Ruiz describes. Shooting off multiple rounds from a .38 caliber pistol inside US House chambers shouting “¡Viva Puerto Rico Libre!” Lebrón intended to die in a suicide by proxy for her occupied country.³² In doing so, Lebrón would have broken her long endurance of being-toward-death in a rebellious act against the impositions of US colonialism.³³ Through this lens in which death is a release from the oppressed liminal state, and in which the liminal interval between life and death is the place from which such a powerful act of freedom may proceed, it is the last minute of *Seaweed Woman* in which Yamashiro forms her act of resistance. Seaweed Woman ceases her enduring repetitious and belabored breath not simply as a pause for dramatic effect but as a death. Her reemergence from the water that follows, as she breathes freely and turns her gaze to the heavens, is a rebirth. In imagining new

³¹ Ibid., 24.

³² Ibid., 35. Translation: “Long live a free Puerto Rico.”

³³ Ruiz’s argument references a suicide note Lebrón carried in her pocket, which “critique[ed] the linear notions of life and death,” and her insistence repeatedly to reporters, and in the aforementioned note, that she “didn’t come here to kill, [she] came to die.” Ibid, 36-37.

futures, or rebirths, for the Okinawan body, Yamashiro presents a triumphant act of resistance against imperial forces, an act emerging from this liminal space.

Hyperreal Island Bodies

After years of protest, the decision to close the Vieques base was reached in 2001, and the military completed its withdrawal in 2003. However, Vieques still occupies a liminal space: its political status, as part of Puerto Rico, an Estado Libre Asociado (Free Associated State, or commonwealth), is not that of a state or a sovereign nation. The land previously occupied by the military in Vieques is under discussion as the island decides how to best allocate the land. It is this latter liminal state that concerns Allora & Calzadilla in *Under Discussion*, a single channel 6 minute and 14-second-long video shot on and around the coastal waters of Vieques (**Fig. 11**). Allora & Calzadilla's camera follows a stand-in for the Viequense island body, played by Diego De La Cruz Gaitan, who steers an upside-down wooden table equipped with a boat motor through sparkling blue waters surrounding the island. Differing from Yamashiro's use of underwater and in-water cinematography to picture the island body, Allora & Calzadilla's camera remains above and on the water to picture the island body's position in relation to its waters, coast, and formerly occupied land by connecting the performer's gaze to the surveyed areas in close ups of the performer looking outward and wide, moving shots of the island from his perspective on the boat. By analyzing Allora & Calzadilla's picturing of the island body—first, via the use of the table/boat as a physical realization of metaphor; second, through the juxtaposition of language and texts used to mark and regulate land-use and possession; and third, by effacing the boundary between the human island body and geographic island body—I argue that it is distinctly in the

hyperreality of liminality that the meaning “island body,” as both human and geographic, takes form.

The Oxford Dictionary of Critical Theory defines hyperreality as “an aesthetic mode of reproduction or replication that strives to produce an effect that is more real than the real thing being copied.”³⁴ For Thomassen, it is “*in the hyper-reality* of liminality [that] meaning-formation take[s] form.”³⁵ My argument’s dependence on Thomassen’s framework thus extends to its reliance on hyperreality, particularly the framework set forth by French theorist Jean Baudrillard. Baudrillard contends that “Reality itself founders in hyperrealism, the meticulous reduplication of the real, preferably through another, reproductive medium, such as photography.”³⁶ (I submit that video is a form of photographic realism that goes even further to reproduce the real not only through image, but through movement and sound as well.) “From medium to medium, the real is volatilized, becoming an allegory of death,” he continues. “But it is also, in a sense, reinforced through its own destruction.”³⁷ If the island body’s reality is an experience of the liminal, of being-towards-death, then its position is best articulated through that which turns reality into an “allegory or death” reinforced by a ritual of cyclical destruction not so different from the endurance performed by the island body, as profiled by Ruiz. The island body in *Seaweed Woman* and the island body in *Under Discussion* are captured through the hyperreal

³⁴ Ian Buchanan, “Hyperreality,” in *A Dictionary of Critical Theory*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2018), 251.

³⁵ Thomassen, *Liminality and the Modern*, 1. (emphasis added).

³⁶ Jean Baudrillard, “The Hyper-Realism of Simulation,” in *Art in Theory, 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2001), 1049.

³⁷ Ibid.

form of video, “[effacing the] contradiction between the real and imaginary” to form meaning—one of resistance from the liminal position.³⁸

In an interview, Allora references what the artists discuss in *Under Discussion*. “A civil disobedience campaign was successful in forcing the military out, but the land has been designated as a federal wildlife refuge, a zone of natural processes in need of protection from humans after years of violent bombardment,” she explains. “This designation entails its own violence, marginalizing island residents who demand that the land be fully decontaminated and turned over to municipal management so that its future can be democratically debated.”³⁹ Let us acknowledge that the success of this civil disobedience campaign owes much to Viequense and Puerto Rican artists who put both their money and their bodies on the line in protest, among them Rafi Trelles, Luis Alonso, Paloma Todd, Marta Pérez García, Elías Adasme, and Gustavo Castrodad, among others.⁴⁰ Allora & Calzadilla direct Puerto Rican Diego De la Cruz Gaitan, at the time a student at the Escuela de Artes Plásticas and the son of a fisherman-activist, as the performing body in *Under Discussion*; this is a point of difference with Yamashiro, who with her own Okinawan body performs for the camera.⁴¹ While Calzadilla has longer-standing ties to Puerto Rico, both partners were not born there; and Philadelphia-born Allora had no cultural ties to the island prior to their marriage. The choice to film De la Cruz Gaitan echoes

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Elaine A. King, “Art as Monster: A Conversation with Allora Calzadilla,” *Sculpture Magazine*, June 2011, p.25.

⁴⁰ “Press Release. I believe and Create in Vieques: Artists for Peace Enter the US Navy Restricted Zone in Vieques,” ¡Vieques Libre!, August 28, 2000, <http://www.peacehost.net/Vieques/latest.html>.

⁴¹ King, “Art as Monster,” 25; and Hans-Ulrich Obrist, “1000 Words: Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla,” *ArtForum*, March 1, 2005, <https://www.artforum.com/print/200503/1000-words-jennifer-allora-and-guillermo-calzadilla-8468>.

Allora's assertion that the duo "are not activists."⁴² By maintaining this distance from both direct activism and from the equation of the Puerto Rican island body with their own, they perhaps elude the political dangers of co-opting Puerto Rican experiences of oppression and resistance for commercial success and prestige. Indeed, the duo have exhibited globally and were selected as US representatives for the 2011 Venice Biennale, which is, for some, the apex of artistic success.⁴³ Nevertheless, a close examination of their work, and of their picturing of the island body (even if not their own), demonstrates a critical and anti-imperial engagement with hyperreal liminality.

In *Under Discussion*, De la Cruz Gaitan sits on the underside of the table as it floats on water, the four table legs protruding upwards like strange masts as a motor propels it through water. It is De la Cruz Gaitan who activates the rumbling motor, lifting the front edge of the table upwards like a speedboat. One shot depicts De la Cruz Gaitan's point of view, through the table legs, but most of the video is shot from a distance, alternating between shots of the land, the water, and De la Cruz Gaitan on the boat. Aerial shots survey the boat's wake through the water, bomb testing site craters, and leftover military structures. A close-up of De la Cruz Gaitan connects his gaze to the land and sea surveyed by the camera.

For a moment in the film, he stands on top of the composite table-boat floating in the ocean, silhouetted by the bright sun (**Fig. 12**). The image articulates a power, an ownership, but his position is rendered absurd: he is atop a floating table.

⁴² King, "Art as Monster," 24.

⁴³ No Puerto Rican-by-birth has ever represented the United States at the Venice Biennale.

As a metaphor, the table recalls the conference table, a site of discussion and negotiation and frequently used metaphorically in discourses of equity and inclusion (i.e., “making room at the table” or “voices at the table”). As a rhetorical device, the table acts as a line between the binary of who is and is not “at the table,” who is and is not holding power. The character that De la Cruz Gaitan embodies is a stand-in for the Viequenses: De la Cruz Gaitan, at the time a student of Escuela de Artes Plásticas, San Juan, is the son of a Viequense fisherman and prominent leader of fisherman anti-base activists active in the 1970s.⁴⁴ Occupying a liminal space through this hyperreal picturing of metaphor: he is not at or away from the table, he is under/over it. Under the table and on top of the boat: he is under discussion. Under the boat and on top of the table: water is under discussion. By attaching an absurd image of a table-boat, what this dual metaphor represents—the value of property over people and the systematic exclusion of Viequenses in the development of land/water use policies before and after the Navy's departure—can be understood as equally absurd. The island body's occupation as both *on* and *under* speaks to the many ways in which he is dually involved and ignored in conversations on land/water use and sovereignty. It is this physical performance of metaphor, of the island body on/under the table, that becomes more real than the literal physical position of the Viequense island body. It pictures the island body's liminal position between “on” the land and “under” occupation, a hyperreal picture that “[effaces the] contradiction between real” (the

⁴⁴ Yates McKee, “Wake, Vestige, Survival: Sustainability and the Politics of the Trace in Allora and Calzadilla's Land Mark,” *October*, Vol. 133, Summer 2010, 20-48.

island body's physical position) "and the imaginary" (the island body's metaphorical position).⁴⁵

Another significant shot in the video is of a bilingual sign marking a formerly occupied area of land now designated as a National Refuge (**Fig. 13**). It reads "BIENVENIDOS" (*welcome*), "ABIERTO.... OPEN.... Por favor, ayudanos a proteger las plantas y los animales. Please help us protect the plants and animals." It proceeds with a list of prohibited and permitted uses of the space. The camera passes another sign that commands, "No Traspase. Personal Autorizado Solamente. Peligro. Explosivos," above two graphics—a skull and crossbones, and an exploding missile (**Fig. 14**). Below is the English translation: "No Trespassing. Authorized Personnel Only. Danger. Explosives." If the image of De La Cruz Gaitan on the table-boat constitutes a hyperreal visual rhetoric of juxtaposition to articulate the island body's liminal position under discussions of occupation, then the juxtaposing images of these two bilingual signs constitute a hyperreal visual rhetoric out of the reproduction of rhetoric itself, articulating the island body's liminal position under regulations of occupation.

The signs' words, "Welcome" and "No Trespassing," conflict not only in affect, but also in effect: the language prompts positive and negative response, respectively, and indicates land that is open and closed, safe and unsafe. The picturing of these two signs and their polar phrasings calls attention to how language creates and regulates liminal spaces through oppositional meanings and in the necessary space between words in a sentence or phrase. In the case of Vieques, the pictured

⁴⁵ Baudrillard, "The Hyper-realism of Simulation," 1049.

language simultaneously regulates the geographic island body and reproduces its liminality: once open to its inhabitants prior to the Navy occupation that closed much of the area, it is now both open *and* closed under strict regulation. Now a National Refuge, the land must be protected by the Viequenses, but in this regulated way, after decades of trying to protect it against sanctioned destruction. The juxtaposition between the two languages on each sign, English and Spanish, again articulates the liminal island body as neither US American nor Spanish (of its former colonizer) but instead existing between the two impacts of colonial powers without a surviving indigenous language to identify itself.⁴⁶ Through such picturing of language, Allora & Calzadilla ask: who possesses the island body? Who regulates it? To whom is it open to? These questions are especially complicated when considering that these preserved areas and their beaches act as a major draw to US tourists and are no longer available to the Viequenses for agricultural, residential, or fishing uses. Furthermore, if such uses of land are regulated, then these regulations extend to the bodies who occupy the land. No definitive answers to these questions are reproduced in video by Allora & Calzadilla, because the answers are not exclusively "outsider" or "insider," but rather something in between—thus, the necessary picturing of liminality. The discussion is not resolved, and Vieques remains in a liminal state.

Allora & Calzadilla have concerned themselves with hyperreal picturing of liminality in many of their works, including two videos which center Viequense issues that, along with *Under Discussion*, are grouped in a series entitled *Land Mark*. Part of the series, the video *Half Mast/Full Mast* (2010) features performers taking on

⁴⁶ While some indigenous Taíno language survives in Puerto Rico, it is considered extinct.

the form of a flag, their bodies stiffly extended from a flagpole in a feat of strength (Fig. 15). The hyperreal image created by a forced juxtaposition, human-flag—just like table-boat—speaks to the absurdity of a forced relationship between the US military and Puerto Rico and of the liminal state itself, placed (like the hyphen that each dual sign contains) between sovereignty and occupation. In the island bodies in *Under Discussion*—De La Cruz Gaitan’s character *and* the land surveyed—and in the picturing of island bodies as inanimate flags that mark land-possession in *Half Mast/Full Mast*, meaning is formed out of the hyperreality of liminality that each video describes. For Allora & Calzadilla, the line between island body as human and as geographic is effaced. When land is suspended in a liminal state between sovereign and not, as these works demonstrate, their liminality is also experienced by the human island body.

“Today, *reality itself is hyperrealistic*,” Baudrillard argues. “Now, the whole of everyday political, social, historical, economic reality is incorporated into the simulative dimension of hyperrealism; we already live out the ‘aesthetic’ hallucination of reality.”⁴⁷ The political, social, historical, and economic realities faced by the island-body under US occupation may indeed seem like a hallucination of reality, realities that continually contest, challenge, and threaten the island body. Is there, then, not a better way to articulate such an existence than by activating its hyperreal qualities, blurring the reality of islands and bodies on video with the imaginary, or more accurately the *nightmarish* endurance of occupation?

⁴⁷ Baudrillard, “The Hyper-realism of Simulation,” 1050.

(Re)possessing Island Bodies

Beatriz Santiago Muñoz, born in San Juan, Puerto Rico, works primarily in film and video. She has exhibited solo shows in San Juan, San Francisco, Los Angeles, London, and Miami, and in important group exhibitions such as *Bienal del Caribe* at Museo de Arte Moderno, Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic (2003), *Infinite Island: Contemporary Caribbean Art*, Brooklyn Museum (2007), and the Trienal Poli/Gráfica de San Juan (2011). Her work, *Post-Military Cinema* (2014), is an 11-minute-long digital color video filmed at a shuttered movie theater on a former military base in Puerto Rico. Beginning with the sights and sounds of a young forest outside of the theater, Santiago Muñoz quietly films the degrading structure, the surrounding natural life, and the visual markings of ten years of sunlight, rain, and humidity on the undisturbed site. The video closes with a long hand-held take as Santiago Muñoz leaves the site on foot. With a keen attention to the power of perspective, Santiago Muñoz notes that “the aerial view is the preferred representational mode of the US Navy,” one reflected in the hundreds of aerial photographs of Puerto Rico produced by the US during their occupation.⁴⁸ “The military view, and the reproduction of this view in its transparency, from the air, is a view of domination,” she continues. “To see the future of the place, rather than the ruin of the military past, one must look from ground level, let the forest grow back, block the transparency, collapse, misunderstand, constantly change position.”⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Beatriz Santiago Muñoz, “I am going to describe a ritual,” *Beatriz Santiago Muñoz: A Universe of Fragile Mirrors*, ed. Cherry Pickman (Miami: Pérez Art Museum Miami, 2016), 39.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 39-40.

Offering visual transparency, this aerial view of domination can be traced back to the aerial perspective in mapping. An integral practice in the formation of empire, as when European marine forces competed to claim possession of Caribbean islands, the practice of mapping implicates the dominant aerial view in the act of taking possession by force.⁵⁰ Santiago Muñoz in *Post-Military Cinema* offers another way of looking at the land (i.e., on foot, on ground level) that reflects a *repossession*.

While Allora & Calzadilla picture the hyperreal liminality of post-military occupation through a reproduction of domination (i.e., the aerial view) to comment on the ongoing dispossession of Puerto Rican land, Santiago Muñoz pictures the liminality of post-military occupation through images taken from the ground level to witness the slow process of repossession. In *Under Discussion*, the combination of aerial and on-water cinematography reproduces the perspective of both maps and seafaring imperial ships. Such a picturing suspends the dominating military-occupation in perpetuity to illustrate how, despite the intervening departure of the U.S. military, the land is not yet fully returned to or repossessed by the Viequense. Santiago Muñoz imagines another way of looking. She produces a view from within the island rather than (a reproduction of) an external view projected onto the island. Having established how the island body under US imperialism is pictured as liminal and hyperreal, I now will demonstrate how the liminal, hyperreal island body can be

⁵⁰ Author and cartographer Denis Wood makes the argument that maps have the “ability to link the territory with what comes with it,” which made it crucially successful in the expansion of European Empire. Denis Wood and John Fels, *The Power of Maps* (New York: Guilford Press, 1992); and Angela Sutton and Charlton W. Yingling argue that through maps, Europe visualized a commodified and exoticized Caribbean which in turn naturalized imperialism. Angela Sutton and Charlton W. Yingling, “Projections of Desire and Design in Early Modern Caribbean Maps,” *The Historical Journal* 63, no. 4 (2020): 789–810.

pictured as repossessing. Through an examination of *Post-Military Cinema*'s sonic qualities; slow narrative time; subversion of the desiring gaze; and attention to nature as an agent of repossession, I present the work as witness to the island body's charged and imminent resistance.

Visible from Vieques across the Pasaje de Vieques (a body of water between Vieques and Puerto Rico) is Roosevelt Roads, a decommissioned naval station and the location for *Post-Military Cinema*. During WWII, Franklin D. Roosevelt ordered its creation, an act that dispossessed 4,000 residents of their land and annexed half of the municipality of Ceiba.⁵¹ It would become the largest US navy base in the world by land mass, spanning 8,500 acres in Ceiba, hundreds of acres from the abutting coastline of the Naguabo municipality, and the 26,000 acres acquired in Vieques (**Fig. 2**).⁵² Whereas weapons testing took place in Vieques, Roosevelt Roads hosted nuclear submarines in its harbor, developed extensive base infrastructure, and constructed a quintessential US-style suburb for military families.⁵³ To this day, approximately 17 years after its closing following the Vieques protests, the remains of distinctly American base architecture—baseball field stands, a golf course, a K-12 school—are being slowly swallowed by indigenous tropical plant life (**Fig. 16, 17**).

Santiago Muñoz documents nature's process of repossessing this previously occupied land in *Post-Military Cinema*. She turns her camera onto, or *into* the now closed El Coqui Theater. Her approach effectively turns the cinema inside-out,

⁵¹ Déborah Berman Santana, "Struggles for Ex-Base Lands in Puerto Rico," *Peace Review* 22, no. 2 (2010): p.159, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10402651003751438>.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ While weapons testing did not take place in Ceiba, toxic destruction was still present. For example, Santana's own uncle was one of several Roosevelt Roads employees who died from rare diseases after working with toxic materials. Ibid.

turning the exterior of the theater (i.e., the geographic island body) into the cinematic event. Santiago Muñoz begins from within El Coqui Theater, her camera turned towards the theater doors as they open onto the exterior theater of a young forest growing around and into El Coqui (**Fig. 18, 19**). Ten years old, the forest is already dense and full of life.⁵⁴ Within the first seconds of the film, coquis—small frogs indigenous to the island and emblems of Puerto Rico and its culture—produce a recognizable chorus (“*khoh-KEE*”) that emanates from the forest as afternoon light streams through the cracks of the cinema doors. As a preview to the hyperreal “*Coqui Theater*,” (i.e., the forest as the cinema and the coquis as its score) the sound bleeds into the building, reminiscent of late-arriving audiences opening the doors to a film already underway, spilling sound into the lobby space.

Here, Santiago Muñoz again departs from an earlier strategy of Allora & Calzadilla. Their video *Returning of a Sound* (2004; from the *Land Mark* series) features the activist Homar as he drives a motorcycle with a trumpet attached to its muffler through previously occupied land in Vieques (**Fig. 20**).⁵⁵ The vehicle produces an outrageous sound that the artists conceived as a sonic reclamation of the land much like bygone musical accompaniments to military processions. Visiting these areas of the former base takes one out of the way of daily life in Vieques, over 10 miles away from the small town of Isabel Segunda, and via dirt roads ridden with potholes that are best handled by 4x4 vehicles (**Fig. 21**). The aural experience of penetrating as far into the base area as Homar, or as Santiago Muñoz, is that of a quiet

⁵⁴ The base was closed in 2004, and *Post-Military Cinema* completed in 2014.

⁵⁵ King, *Art as Monster*, 24.

cacophony of natural sounds: birds, breeze, and if one steps into one of vacated buildings, bats clicking above. The explosion of bombs were once so loud that they would travel across the other side of Vieques, but now the quiet sounds of natural life can only be heard. Yet, in *Returning of a Sound* the triumphant sound of the trumpet-muffler disrupts the quiet with a proclamation of repossession. Conversely, the coquis and other natural noises present in *Post-Military Cinema*'s soundtrack announce a space already enacting a form of return, reclamation, and repossession unto itself.

Santiago Muñoz quietly steps into a cinema already underway as the camera moves from her “lobby” (the theater interior) to just outside the theater doors. Muñoz proceeds to capture images of the young forest, leaves rustling in the breeze after a light rain, using the architecture of El Coqui Theater to frame images of the trees. The theater's roof line cuts across her view and she lingers on a partially obstructed forest through propped open theater doors (**Fig. 22**). She takes in a detailed, close-up view of a swaying branch against a backdrop of bokeh produced by the few spots of lights through the forest, the product of its densely-packed canopy (**Fig. 23**). These internally framed compositions of the land and foregrounded details place *Post-Military Cinema* in dialogue with some of the earliest well-known landscapes of Puerto Rico, notably those of Francisco Oller y Cestero.

Francisco Oller y Cestero (1833-1917) is well known as Puerto Rico's second earliest most successful painter after José Campeche y Jordán (1751-1809). Like Campeche, Oller mastered a European style, infusing it with his unique Puerto Rican perspective. A member of the well-known circle of impressionists, he married an imported painterly technique with his Caribbean eye in a number of plantation

landscapes.⁵⁶ Rendered with characteristic loose brushwork, the impressionist effect on such scenes as *Hacienda La Fortuna* (1885) is generative of a proto-cinema antecedent to *Post-Military Cinema* (**Fig. 24**).⁵⁷ Both Oller's and Santiago Muñoz's narrative time unfolds slowly, unlike the fixed scenes of 19th century realism predating impressionism. Pictured in *Hacienda La Fortuna* are a few enslaved laborers dressed in white, oxen pulling a cart, and the yellow/green plain of cut sugar cane in the lower third of the composition. Further contributing to the sense of slow cinematic time is the sparse white mist floating above the field, the diffused clouds unfurling in the sky, and the soft plume of smoke arising from the sugar mill's stack. In *Post-Military Cinema*, Santiago Muñoz's fixed, lingering camera sets a leisurely pace of events on screen. Outside of El Coqui Theater, she films a beekeeper lighting kindling for a smoker, a device used to blow smoke into the hive (**Fig. 25**). This smoke masks attack pheromones, released by bees when threatened, and hinders their ability to alert the hive of danger. Sounds of crackling fire precede the buzzing of the hive; the beekeeper puffs smoke into the colony that made its way through the cracks of the building. No doubt, Santiago Muñoz plays on the idea of colony: where once

⁵⁶ "Forced labor camps" more accurately reflects the sites pictured in such landscapes, but to maintain clarity in my reference to the genre of painting Oller produces I use "plantation landscapes" here.

⁵⁷ As Edward J. Sullivan, citing Jennifer Raab, demonstrates, the works of US American painter, Frederic Church (1826-1900) function in the same manner. Church filled landscapes of the Caribbean and South American with so much detail that they also acted as an early form of cinema for its audiences. The large-scale paintings attracted masses of US Americans who purchased tickets to see them, and were encouraged to view through opera glasses, taking in the detailed flora one by one. Church's details produce a hyperreal image and, in its consumable surplus, echo the concurrent US notion manifest destiny that fueled imperial expansion: the endless resources of the natural world are God's gift to the white, US American man. It is worth noting that Church's works, preceding the annexation of Puerto Rico by the US (and Oller's plantation landscapes) would have prepared US audiences to view the island with a consuming, possessive gaze of desire. Edward J. Sullivan, "Francisco Oller and the Worlds of the Caribbean," in *From San Juan to Paris and Back: Francisco Oller and Caribbean Art in the Era of Impressionism* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 2014), 31.

outsider (human) colonists occupied this space, the most natural of (apian) inhabitants have unapologetically moved in. Achieving the same effect as Oller's clouds, mist, and smoke, Muñoz here holds her camera on the billowing smoke rising away through the trees, highlighting the streams of light making their way through the vegetation. With a focus on the movements of natural elements (clouds, smoke, and light), the temporal qualities of both *Hacienda La Fortuna* and *Post-Military Cinema* challenge the viewer to decelerate in accordance with the slow-time of nature.

While the two temporally distant artists play with time in similar ways, their achieved effects vary greatly. Latin America art history specialist Edward J. Sullivan writes of Oller's role in picturing "landscapes of desire" that portray the land resources that drew the eye of imperial stakeholders and softened the view of labor conditions.⁵⁸ One such landscape of desire is Oller's *Hacienda Aurora* (1898-99), painted during the Spanish-American war and just before the US became Puerto Rico's second colonizer (**Fig. 26**). Sullivan contends that that it evokes an "unmistakable air of melancholy... not nostalgia for the old order, but perhaps a certain uneasiness about what is to come with new political and social circumstances on the island."⁵⁹ Indeed, Oller's wide view, sparsely populated with figures of enslaved workers, depicts the decline of the sugar industry in the years just before slavery was outlawed in Puerto Rico and romanticizes the period before transition by suspending it in slow time. In contrast, Santiago Muñoz tightens her frame so that the image is as densely populated as the forest surrounding El Coqui. There is no

⁵⁸ Edward J. Sullivan, "Landscapes of Desire: The Land as Resource in the Caribbean," in *Picturing the Americas: Landscape Painting from Tierra Del Fuego to the Arctic* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 2015), pp. 145-153.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 151.

sweeping emptiness in the frame to foster a sense of void and loss. In doing so, Santiago Muñoz resists any such connection to melancholy or uneasiness about what is to come and, moreover, determinedly does not seek to soften the damages of the past through her picturing of decay.

With the same assured indifference of the trees that surround the theater, Muñoz depicts the beauty of both growth and decay. In a quasi-screenplay for *Post-Military Cinema*, she writes:

“The devastation of the land... and military retreat have created opportunities to observe [forest] growth... The tropical heat and humidity helps life grow faster, denser... there is no feeling of a new balance, of stillness, or of silence. It is a raging battle, a din, moving forward into the future through reproduction, rot, and death... There are large cotton trees growing closer to the ocean. They are exuberant and overgrown now; useless to that old economy and its society. This unreachable cotton is beautiful... All of this without exception is part of the image and the event. It is on the threshold of disintegration and expansion. It is impossible to tell where the event or the image ends. The threshold is always in motion.”⁶⁰

Both Santiago Muñoz’s script and video resist a treatment of transition that, like Oller’s, replicates a human understanding of time that is episodic. *Post-Military Cinema*’s slow narrative time does not paint a pastoral picture like that of Oller’s *haciendas* (“of a new balance, of stillness, or of silence”). Rather, she honors the

⁶⁰ Beatriz Santiago Muñoz, “A Natural History of One Frame of Film,” *Beatriz Santiago Muñoz: A Universe of Fragile Mirrors*, ed. Cherry Pickman (Miami: Pérez Art Museum Miami, 2016), 139-140.

steady slowness of moments—a spider tenderly perched on its web, rusted debris on the forest floor—to cultivate a sensibility less aligned with historical chapters and more with ongoing cosmological evolution: “a raging battle, a din, moving forward into the future through reproduction, rot, and death.”⁶¹ Whereas Oller uses slow cinematic time to celebrate the land’s resources and to mourn the possibility of a change in ownership, Muñoz’s slow time pictures landscape that exists as something other than property, denying the imperial impulse to fix and to own and thriving instead beyond the landscape of desire. Here, the activity of existence is a reclamation and repossession of the land by the land. If Oller’s reproduction of the real portrays an idealized island body in the service of empire, Santiago Muñoz subverts such realism through hyperrealism, animating the land to reveal its own pre-existing animation, to picture the island body’s moving threshold of repossession.

Santiago Muñoz’s camera lingers the longest on light, dappled by the dense forest and projected onto the exterior and interior walls, cement floor, and remaining blue seats of El Coqui Theater (**Fig. 27**). With its doors propped open, the theater itself becomes a screen onto which a soft light is projected, filtered by branches and leaves that rustle and sway to make the light and shadows dance for the interval (45-minutes to an hour) which the light is angled in such a way as to reach the theater’s interior.⁶² Where military-base residents once occupied the cinema seats, daylight projects the shadows of a growing Puerto Rican forest—now, a cinema made by the land, for the land. In this cinema, there is no narrative arc, only movement and

⁶¹ Ibid., 139.

⁶² Ibid., 137.

change. The film departs from the hyperreal works of Parisian photographers Yves Marchand (b.1981) and Romain Meffre (b.1987), for example, which picture interiors of derelict and repurposed theaters of North America (**Fig. 28**). These images are lush with detail but nevertheless visually consumable because they are fixed in one static photograph employing a deep depth of field. Santiago Muñoz resists reproducing a spectacle of ruin for the desiring gaze through tighter framing and shorter depth of field. While Marchand and Meffre offer the viewer the chance to visually possess the entirety of the space, fixing the image in time even if in the process of decay, Santiago Muñoz denies the viewer such totality, and thus, of possession. She centers the repossessing event—the slow but raging takeover of the former building by the forest vegetation—in an image that she imagines created by the forest itself. In the dappled light projections onto the building, the forest (island body) casts an image of itself outside of the possessing, consuming, imperial, and human gaze.

Much like the aforementioned landscape of desire, the consuming gaze is reproduced by a cinema of desire in works such as *Romance Tropical* (1934) (**Fig. 29**). The first Puerto Rican feature-length film with sound, it was thought to be lost for 80 years but was miraculously found in the collections of the University of California Los Angeles Film & Television Archive in 2017. Desire is at the center of its Hollywood-style narrative—desire for hidden treasure typical of Caribbean pirate tales and no less, for whiteness in its portrayal of female romantic desirability. The desirability of these objects—riches and whiteness—is entrenched in the realistic depictions of events, however fantastical, to produce a believable, entertaining narrative that requires the viewers to adopt the desires of the protagonist for their

own.⁶³ Again, Santiago Muñoz resists such trappings of a cinema of desire. Her lingering close ups of forest vegetation, soundscape of coquis and bees, and play with abstracted light deny the viewer narrative escapism, present even in conventional documentary film, in the service of a hyperreal picturing that presents the repossession-by-forest as more real than the real.

On location at El Coqui Theater, Santiago Muñoz found a piece of film, presumably the foot-long piece of celluloid pictured in *Post-Military Cinema* strewn across the forest floor (**Fig. 30**).⁶⁴ After scanning the set of eighty frames of 35mm film, the artist printed ten photographs from the material, comprising the work entitled *10 years* (2014) (**Fig. 31**). Pictured are not only the remnants of the original images—a fighter pilot in an oxygen mask, Navy helicopters, a submarine, and a fighter jet—but layers of alterations produced by the environment—spotty bits of purplish lichen, splotches of green, and an immeasurable number of scratches that create bright white gashes and marks across each frame. Santiago Muñoz speculates that the film would have originally been used as a leader for the feature films shown at El Coqui or test film for the projectionist. Now, however, these military-produced images have been transformed by ten years of light and natural elements, repossessed by the forest as their new auteur. The human is removed by the island: its rain, sediment, leaves, fungus, and lichen have slowly obscured the human's image on celluloid, turning it into the geographic island body's self-portrait. Santiago Muñoz's landscape here becomes an agent of repossession. In *Post-Military Cinema*, the

⁶³ Film scholar Laura Mulvey argues that the cinema camera reproduces the desiring male gaze which is adopted by viewers regardless of gender. Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (January 1975): pp. 6-18, <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/16.3.6>.

⁶⁴ Santiago Muñoz, "A Natural History."

landscape is not a backdrop for action, but the cinematographer, protagonist, and audience at once, and through such active roles it demonstrates the potential energy of resistance and repossession stored in the liminal island body. Santiago Muñoz pictures the dispossession of Puerto Rican land by US forces and the repossession of the island by the body of land itself in a narrative that, via transnational connections, threatens the ideologies behind the occupational force.

Epilogue: Binaries and Borders

Santiago Muñoz pictures the liminality of the (geographic) island body in an act of repossession. Yamashiro's and Allora & Calzadilla's picturing of liminality is just as engaged in resistance through their powerful articulations of an enduring island body. Liminality, in each case, serves as an effective tool to resist imperial and essentializing categorizations, and the binary-focused Western gaze that so often views the "other" as a subject to dominate. Such categorizations influenced by this Western vision include the occupied-occupier dichotomy, the development of the notion of race as a hierarchical system through which to subjugate the "other;" and the establishment of land ownership and regulation in areas where land had not previously been conceived of as property. It is in this liminal space and through the picturing of liminality that the island body can resist imperially imposed categorizations of "occupied," "other," and "owned."

This picturing of liminality can be extended to a larger context indirectly addressed by these works: the Cold War—the hostile tension between the US-led Western Bloc and Soviet-led Eastern Bloc in which capitalism and communism emerged as oppositional forces. The Cold War was the powerful driver for US global domination post-World War II. Immerwahr's chosen descriptors—"Greater United States," a "hidden empire"—remind us of what has resulted from this desire for global domination: a nation whose military (and economic and political) presence has expanded US borders while simultaneously rendering them invisible. *Seaweed Woman*, *Under Discussion*, and *Post-Military Cinema* connect two islands out of many in this "Greater United States" as liminal spaces created by US occupation. The

picturing of liminality enables the artist to articulate the in-betweenness of islands under US occupation and bridges the waters that separate their geographic locations through the documentation of comparable experiences.

In turn, this model can be applied to critique the Cold War ideologies that gave birth to these occupations in the first place. Three decades after the Fall of the Wall, Cold War ideologies still color US relations with and military positions in Japan, Puerto Rico, and many other countries and territories. The US Forces Japan's highly propagandist "mission video" refers to Japan as the region "where the contest between free and repressive visions of the future will be decided" as images of a Japanese shopping center and flashes of stock market symbols play over the words "free" and images of communist North Korean military processions play over the word "repressive."⁶⁵ In February 2022, Russia's President Vladimir Putin proved that he has every intention of building back the nation to its former Soviet-era footing with the ongoing invasion of Ukraine. In *Global Art and the Cold War*, John J. Curley explains how the binary between Cold War political forces was upheld in art historical discourse. While this discourse characterized abstract expressionism and social realism as emblems of East and West ideologies, it also created a byproduct: an un-articulated liminal space in which many artists traveled and from which they critiqued the very ideologies attached to them by critics and art historians.⁶⁶ Indeed, the enforcement of a binary conception of style, while valuable to the Cold War powers in their dissemination of ideological propaganda, was threatened by the

⁶⁵ *The Mission of US Forces Japan, US Forces, Japan*, 2019, <https://www.usfj.mil/>.

⁶⁶ John J. Curley, *Global Art and the Cold War* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2019).

liminal by-product. This residual and subversive liminality, as pictured by Yamashiro, Allora & Calzadilla, and Santiago Muñoz, threatens US imperial ideology by exposing the absurdity of the binary and the US position therein. The liminal Okinawans and Viequenses are only threatening if they reveal themselves. The picturing of the liminal island body in these works participates in the transnational resistance of imperialism through the meaning-formations they produce.

What does such a powerful liminality mean for the future of American art? The liminal island body under US imperialism not only speaks to the conditions imposed by the US, but also offers a rounding-out of a limited, one-sided history produced within the US. Should the canon of American art be limited to artists born or working in the US? Or might it be significantly enriched by art that is *about* the US and from positionalities created *by* the US? One can envision a “liminalization” of the discipline’s borders in the same way that liminal island bodies challenge the borders of the nation (beyond the continental US). The liminalization of American art promises a non-teleological approach to art history—one that would not abandon oppressions the field has historically enabled and profited from. It would instead integrate the field’s conditions and (Western, binary) ideologies as an impetus for the repossession of the genre. Best articulated by scholar Sherrie L. Baver, “peace is more than the end of bombing,” and as she argues, it is achieved through organized collective resistance.⁶⁷ Similarly, an expansive history of American art necessitates

⁶⁷ Sherrie L. Baver, “‘Peace Is More Than the End of Bombing’ The Second Stage of the Vieques Struggle,” *Latin American Perspectives* 33, no. 1 (January 2006): pp. 102-115, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0094582x05283520>.

more than just an end of violence, it requires a collective and transnational process of continued repossession by those whom it has dispossessed.

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