

## Reproductive Anticolonialism: Placental Politics, Weaponised Wombs and the Power of Abjection in the Early Spanish Mariana Islands

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Then, forgotten time crops up suddenly and condenses into a flash of lightning an operation that, if it were thought out, would involve bringing together the two opposite terms but, on account of that flash, is discharged like thunder. The time of abjection is double: a time of oblivion and thunder, of veiled infinity and the moment when revelation bursts forth.[1]

1. In her recent essay, 'A History of Chamorro Nurse-Midwives in Guam and a "Placental Politics" for Indigenous Feminism,' historian Christine Taitano DeLisle writes of the need for a Chamorro 'placental politics' of the past. A novel theorisation of this might serve as the basis for, contemporary struggles and debates concerning a new round of militarisation and development in Guam, but also more generally, for indigenous feminism and indigenous feminist practices.[2] She adduces her formulation directly from how the *pattera* (nurse-midwives), in defiance of US naval orders to burn or discard the *pâres* (placenta), continued to bury the *pâ:res* or allow family members to do so. The placenta was buried out of respect for deep Chamorro symbolic and cultural meanings connecting notions and expectations of self in relation to land and community in a system of reciprocal kinship relations and stewardship obligations in the early twentieth century. Yet, as she notes, the history of placental politics began well before Yankee imperialism in Guam. DeLisle continues, "'placental politics" is a native-inspired theory and practice of being and action *informed and guided by ancient ideas of self in relation to land and the primacy of stewardship of land amidst enduring colonial transformations*[my emphasis].'[3]
2. My purpose in this article is to demonstrate the deep historical roots of placental politics in the Mariana Islands. My principal aim will be to show that the most significant, profound event in Chamorro history occurred four centuries ago when Chamorro women deployed their powers of reproduction to fight against Spanish subjugation in its various manifestations. As Spanish soldiers, missionaries, and pathogens laid waste to the world of the *taotaomona* (lit. the people of before or more simply, ancestors), the women of the archipelago took up arms—or better yet, wombs—through various means of utilising contraception, abortion, or infanticide, to engage in an anticolonial, liberatory struggle. Whereas the Chamorro men (and perhaps some women) elected to use more conventional weapons such as spears to fight the Spanish, Chamorro women by contrast took to battle by weaponising their wombs. They did this through a phenomenon I term reproductive anticolonialism, which forms a specific inflection of DeLisle's theorisation of placental praxis. I will demonstrate furthermore that these powerful acts—whose distinctiveness can be best understood against the backdrop of indigenous world history—stemmed from a comparatively egalitarian gender order in which women asserted their agency in ways equal to or in certain realms above those of men. Hence this essay will reiterate DeLisle's point that placental politics, rather than constituting an idealised 'return to nature or maternal, biological, reproductive, or even heteronormative utopia,' instead has a deep basis in Chamorro culture and history; one that has been in fact visible from the very moment peoples from the Mariana Islands began to appear in Spanish historical records in the sixteenth century.[4]

3. This however is a problematic, challenging, and improbable history for one simple reason. Save for the rare Dutch, French, or other European navigator who chanced upon the archipelago before the 1800s, our knowledge of Chamorro reproductive anticolonialism in the late-seventeenth century comes nearly exclusively from the pens of Spanish colonial authors, the better part of whom were Jesuit missionaries. Pursuers of instrumental knowledge, they concerned themselves with committing to writing things that above all would further the mission of proselytisation. Thus works like Francisco Garcia's *Vida y Martyrio de el Venerable Padre Diego Lvis de Sanvitores* (Life and martyrdom of the Venerable Father Diego Luis de San Vitores, 1683), Charles Le Gobien's *Histoire des isles Marianes* (History of the Mariana Islands, 1700), Juan José Delgado's *Historia general sacro-profana, política y natural* (General, sacred-profane, political, and natural history, 1754), and so many other reports, memorials, and more convey story after story of the lives, accomplishments, and martyrdoms of the Spanish missionaries and their acolytes who travelled to the Mariana Islands but seldom illuminated the lives and culture of the Chamorros themselves. Following from this, and more vexing for the historian still, was that these authors' colonialist biases, which rendered Chamorros' acts of liberation—such as resisting colonialism through the means of reproduction—as events of an unthinking barbarism. After bemoaning his subjects' sloth and vices, then Governor Francisco Olive y Garcia, for instance, conceded in his *Islas Marianas: Lijeros Apuntes, 1887* (Mariana Islands: Casual notes, 1887):

the real and effective possession of the Mariana islands and the conversion of its natives to Christianity, would not have been accomplished without the shedding of blood, because from the beginning they displayed a great opposition to recognizing Spanish dominion and to subjecting themselves to the practices of the new religion upon being baptized.[5]

4. Were the Chamorros indeed so hapless, thoughtless, and vicious in their dealings with the Spanish? One assumes> then that a presumably superior people like the Spanish would have faced no difficulty in subjugating them. How then, might one read against the grain of their religious zealotry, counterinsurgent prose, and peculiar expressions of Christian-inflected patriarchy to recover precolonial Chamorro women's history?[6]

5. In her work *The Powers of Horror* (1980), Julia Kristeva has shown how the abject harbours the power to disturb the actual. It is for instance not the fact of sickness or death that perturbs; rather it is our act of recognising them that suffuses them with their significative force.

A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not signify death. In the presence of signified death—a flat encephalograph, for instance—I would understand, react, or accept. No, as in true theater, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being.[7]

6. The abject is not merely a form of Other against whom I define myself. It is the repulsive and frightening possibility of what I might become. Viewing it forces me to acknowledge my limits, to demarcate the spaces where I cannot exist; of my failure, of my undoing. Spanish writings about the seventeenth and eighteenth century Mariana Islands depict the rebellious Chamorro women and men as *abject*—as barbaric, ignorant, irrational, wretched subjects. Of course, such a colonialist narrativisation was unremarkable in its time: one could easily find similar depictions of other subject peoples within the empire.[8] In the Mariana Islands' colony however, I contend that such portrayals signalled something more meaningful than yet another exemplification of ethnographic Hispano- or Euro-centrism. If we decode the abject in works like Delgado's *Historia general* and others, we will see that they in fact function to *signal not the heroism and success of Spain's colonial agents* but instead *their defeat*. And Chamorro women, the historical record shows, were the most significant authors of that defeat. In the Spanish archive of the Mariana Islands, events of reproductive anticolonialism punctuate and undermine the narrative of colonial

change and success by unwittingly capturing the glimmers of that which could not be domesticated by the coloniser. Reproductive anticolonialism is the force that, as Kristeva writes, lies outside, beyond the set, and does not seem to agree to the latter's rules of the game. And yet, from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master.<sup>[9]</sup> It was Chamorro women's actions in the late 1600s therefore, which were rendered as abject, that encyst the colonial record with the possibilities of its negation—and carry with them the potential to inform similar struggles today.

### The empire of women over men

7. The potentialities of Chamorro women's anticolonial praxis were grounded in their historic social roles. So as to understand the former we must first say a word about the latter. Politics in the precolonial Mariana Islands before the coming of Spain were highly localised; they played out across the terrain of extended family and clan rather than any larger hierarchical structure. Micronesian structures of power were thus markedly different from those the Spanish encountered in, say, Mexico or Peru, not to mention the metropole itself. Illustrative of this phenomenon is that no single family or dynasty had imposed its rule over the archipelago by the time of Magellan's arrival in 1521, as, for instance, the Saudeleur dynasts had in Pohnpei and the Kamehameha rulers would later in Hawai'i. Once they arrived, the Spanish—whose analyses should by no means be regarded as definitive—identified two broad social classes: elites, called *chamorris* (or *chamori*), and commoners, called *mangatchang* (or *manachang*). Among the elite class, there were two further subdivisions: the *matua* or *matuo*, from which the clan headman (*maga'lahi*) and his spouse (*maga'haga*) would come, and the *acha'otor achoti*, who were sometimes linked by family to the ruling class but were of lower distinction, possibly because their lineage had been banished for some offence in the past.<sup>[10]</sup> How these family lineages came into being by the sixteenth century, the time by which Spanish accounts portray them as unchanging and timeless, is not known. What is clear about these arrangements is that lineage played a determinative role. As the venerated martyr Luis de San Vitores put it, Chamorros had, 'such respect for and such distinctions of lineages, high, low, and medium that one cannot but marvel at such vanity or curiousness in poor, naked people.'<sup>[11]</sup> With no larger bureaucratic, archipelagic-wide state-structure to erode it, the family, conceived as one's extended network of kin, including one's ancestors, formed *the* locus for political struggles. Among the consequences of this, combined with other factors common to Austronesian societies, would be that women possessed a comparatively greater role in shaping society. A number of aspects of Chamorro culture bear this out.
8. One essential custom that undergirded women's power among ancient Chamorros was matrilineality. Clan organisation itself was structured through mothers' lineages, such that villages of 50 to 150 homes, that comprised the basic form of social organisation for Chamorros, each looked back to some distant female progenitor. The practice of marriage thus functioned in life and thereafter to move a man from the orbit of his mother and her lineage into that of his wife. That the ancient Chamorros venerated their ancestors, through means of keeping and safeguarding their skulls (*maranan uchan*), meant further that these deceased foremothers were often brought back into conversation with their living descendants in daily life. Their guidance and blessings, once invoked, carried the possibility for fortuitous change. This dialogue with matrilineal originators undoubtedly contributed to the prominence of elderly women in society more generally, given for instance their prominent roles in the villages as counsellors to their kin about questions ranging from the momentous to the mundane. It is difficult to reconstruct the indigenous precolonial social systems in the Mariana Islands in their entirety and thereby comprehend the significance of pre-Hispanic matrilineality in any truly meaningful sense. First this is because early European ethnographers captured, imperfectly, only select aspects of Chamorro culture, and second because

Spanish colonialism, with its imperatives of reordering social relations according to Christian norms, worked over the centuries to overwrite it.<sup>[12]</sup> Despite that, it is clear that in reckoning lineages, female ancestors were venerated to a greater degree than male ones—a fact that shaped contemporary life in numerous ways.

9. More significant still was that marriage served as an institution to bolster women's political and social capital (as I will discuss in greater detail below). This is because upon becoming wed, a woman gained the power to dictate how individuals in their natal families, women and men both, conducted themselves. Worth noting is that this power to influence was not something enjoyed by unmarried women. The institution of marriage thus *strengthened* a woman's influence, which itself continued to accrue as a married or even divorced woman continued to age. Telling here is that the most significant male figure in ancient Chamorro family was the eldest female's oldest brother, whose power to influence was superior to all others yet still subordinated to that of his apex sister.<sup>[13]</sup> Because of Chamorro social customs men derived their social capital within kinship and clan networks in some significant part from their relation to powerful women.
  
10. Before the advent of Spanish colonialism, most and perhaps all of the medical and health practitioners were women. In the traditional Mariana Islands, the figure of healing came to be called *suruhâna*, a class most often glossed to folk healer. Historians know little about these healers apart from some of their basic tasks. The name for the class itself seems to be an indigenisation of the Spanish word *cirujano* (surgeon), so it is unknown even what ancient Chamorros originally called their doctors, although the term *yo'âmtē*, revitalised and growing in use today, offers one possibility.<sup>[14]</sup> Some aspects of their historic activities and broader culture can be gleaned from the practices of *suruhâna* and, now, *suruhâno/suruhânu* (male folk healers), who practice traditional medicine in the archipelago today. In the most elemental sense the *suruhâna* were healers who made use of herbal remedies and therapeutic methods, such as massage, to treat maladies ranging from simple colds, to orthopaedic injuries, skin disorders, prenatal, maternity, and postnatal care, and to even the most grave conditions. The practice of their craft necessitated that they master the workings of the human body, botany, pharmaceutical compounding, and that—perhaps most importantly—they become dutiful partners with the *manganiti* or *taotaomo'na*, the spirits who inhabited the forests and whose consent they would need to be able to enter into sacred places to extract the proper remedy in the first place and whose powers they would need to ensure the cures were efficacious. Each *suruhâna* learned these skills from an elder family member, as the practice was passed down from generation to generation within a family. Not every member of a family could learn the trade. Instead it was restricted to those who had the ability to learn and become healers. However, it may have been that an already experienced practitioner determined such. For these reasons, they can be said to have been the foremost experts on the human body and the natural world of Micronesia before the advent of modern scientific medicine. That *suruhâna* were predominantly women suggests that they derived their curative prowess from the distinctive powers of the feminine.<sup>[15]</sup>
  
11. Another significant vocation in precolonial Chamorro society was that of the *makahna* (or *kakahna*, shaman). This class was made up of by men, but probably not exclusively so. Like the *suruhâna*, the *makahnas* possessed the power to communicate with the spirits of ancestors (*ante*) through the use of their personal remains—including discarded objects such as their hair, betel nut quids, spit, or even faeces or, more significantly for long-term safekeeping, their skulls. As historian Lawrence J. Cunningham notes, Chamorros sought the aid of shamans:

- To identify ancestral spirits
- To prescribe a means to make restitution to offended spirits
- To transfer supernatural powers to others
- To cast love spells (*atgimat*—enamor, cause to fall in love, bewitch)

To cause sickness or death  
 To produce rain  
 To cause a good harvest  
 To bring good luck, especially in fishing  
 To bring health and healing  
 To tell the future.[16]

12. Spanish sources do not indicate whether the *makahnas* they encountered were male or female, so one can presume those they wrote about were usually men. (Where the Spanish encountered female shamans, as they did in the Philippines for instance, they made repeated note of their sex).[17] 'Nevertheless,' Cunningham notes, 'given the status of women in Chamorro society, it seems likely that some women held the position of *makahna*. This is further supported by the claim by most spiritual practitioners that they did not choose their profession but were called to it by supernatural forces.' [18] Chamorro women may or may not have heeded the call to become *makahnas*. Yet they certainly had greater opportunities to do so in precolonial society before Spanish conquest, because Roman Catholicism would forever foreclose the entry of women into the clergy.
13. While a number of reports and chronicles attempt to describe the particular activities of women in broad fashion, it is often their retelling of particular scenes of everyday life—scarce though they are—that best capture historic expressions of placental politics. Given the centrality of family and clan membership, it follows that the ability to shape life events such as marriage were of crucial importance. Men, in their capacity as fathers, were important decision makers in the early stages of arranging a marriage through providing consent to would-be suitors for their daughters and through their participation in certain rites of passage during the marital ceremonies when they took place. During the marriages themselves, however, women took on more significant roles, precisely because they were the mothers, aunts, and sisters to the bride and groom of the couple-to-be-wed. Most notably, they were central actors in the customs of presenting, distributing, and consuming *hineska' sinagan*, a type of rice-cake arranged into the shape of a pyramid.[19]
14. More significantly, both socially and for the history of placental politics, were women's roles in the social world of married people and, in particular, in the specific role of policing the affairs of married men and in their application of punishment during instances of transgression. Women in the ancient Mariana Islands were the primary enforcers of monogamous marriage—although this was tellingly a norm enforced among men and not necessarily women. Colonial accounts are filled with stories of husbands who betrayed their spouses, through adultery or some other offence, and who were then punished by their wives, often through the use of some blunt instruments as means of castigation. The missionary Juan Pobre de Zamora describes in his *Historia de la Pérdida y Descubrimiento del Galeón San Felipe* (History of the loss and discovery of the galleon San Felipe, 1598–1603), one of the earliest, substantive ethnographies, describes the practice well.

As I have said, when a man and woman marry and live together in a house, though they might be married twenty or thirty years, if the husband betrays the woman or if he has a mistress, she will, if she is sufficiently angered, leave from the house and take with her all of the children and household items [*ajuar*], and remove herself to the her parents' or relatives' house where she will remain. And throughout this time the children will not acknowledge their father, even if he passes by them, and the husband's parents must go to great lengths [*ha de ser muy rogada*] to importune her to return to him.[20]

15. Wives ensured that for errant husbands, the punishment for the crime was psychological and existential, in addition to being physical. Divorce in this context meant that the husband's infidelity would be paid for in his social and economic capital. It is important to underscore that the forced severing of ties between the father and children in these instances was not simply a punishment to be served in his present life; it had continuing repercussions for both his ancestors and

descendants yet to be born. More concretely, by divorcing the father from his offspring, the aggrieved wife was cancelling the possibility that his descendants would venerate his spirit after death—no minor act in a society where lineage provided the architecture for everything. And to be clear, this was the price for the *husband's* infidelity. Zamora continues, 'It is a lesser crime when the woman betrays the man, for which it is easier to receive the forgiveness of the husband, because this sin is greater for men than women.'<sup>[21]</sup> For the wife, apparently no similar penalty existed—or at least not one that these guardians of the social order would enforce.

16. Missionaries who followed in Zamora's wake observed essentially this same scene played out time and time again, to the point where they reiterated this passage, often with their own additions, subtractions, or embellishments, in their own accounts.<sup>[22]</sup> One of them, San Vitores, expressed with the greatest clarity what took place in cases where the wife felt particularly aggrieved.

In their marriages they are so zealous, the women over their men, that if they sense in them any disloyalty, they punish them in various ways. Sometimes the aggrieved woman calls together other women from the Pueblo, grabbing their hats, and spears, goes to the house of the adulterer, and if he has any field, they uproot his crops, and destroy it; then after threatening to spear him, they ultimately throw him out of the house. At other times the offended woman punishes her husband by leaving him; and then her relatives come together at the husband's house, and take out whatever there is in the dwelling, without leaving in it a single lance, nor a mat to sleep on; only the shell of the house [would remain], and at times they were wont to destroy it and knock it down; and this is an indispensable custom.<sup>[23]</sup>

17. Along with the loss of property and public scorn inflicted upon the adulterers described by Zamora, San Vitores, while conveying these in greater detail, also brings to light how the aggrieved wife, with her genetically- and non-blood-related 'sisters,' gave the unfaithful husband a good thrashing. Notable here is that this punitive force consisted not only of the wife's family but of other women from the village, a sort of 'neighbourhood watch' for husbandly monogamy. In this instance too, the institution of marriage in the precolonial Mariana Islands strengthened Chamorro women's influence over men, within both familial and village social structures.
18. Just as significant as the information about women's roles in precolonial Chamorro society we see in these scenes from their everyday lives was the intergenerational nature of an individual's, and particularly a woman's, acts in the present day. Events like marriage conjoined, or divorce forever ruptured, lineages between families; women were thus central in forming, reinforcing, or dissolving the interface between the past and the future. This, rather than a more simplistic desire for redress (although such was surely one factor), was the key motivation behind things like severing the connection of the children with their father, destroying his home, and uprooting his crops (which were cultivated, not coincidentally, on land to which the family itself was intimately connected), a point to be kept in mind for what will follow below. Such were the stakes of placental politics in ancient Chamorro history.
19. For the chroniclers who witnessed everyday scenes such as these (like San Vitores) or wrote about them from a distance (like Le Gobien), they were not events of women's agency to be deeply examined, much less appreciated, but instead signs of the abject. As San Vitores put it with characteristic patriarchal distress,

For this reason the women are the ones who rule the house [*las mugeres fon las que mandan en casa*]; not being master [*señor*] the husband is unable to do what he pleases without her pleasure, or approval; and what is more, neither can he punish his children; because if the woman catches word of this [*sintiendo algo de esto*], she divorces [*se descafa*] the man, and removes herself from her husband, all of the children follow her, without recognizing any other father, apart from he whom the mother takes as her new husband.<sup>[24]</sup>

Another Jesuit, Le Gobien, all but surrendered to the significant force of gender relations in the distant Spanish colony. In the Mariana Islands, there existed, 'an empire of women over their

men.'[25] Spain's desire to build its own empire in the archipelago placed it on a collision course with this historic one.

20. As we will see, it was *this* empire of women over their men that formed the most significant bulwark against the patriarchal edifice of the Spanish Empire in Micronesia. After all, as the recurrence of violence during the decades of Chamorro-Spanish Wars showed, brutalising men and women's bodies alone, no matter how spectacular, inhumane, or un-Christ-like, did not assure that Chamorros would submit to the missionaries, as their documentation of the colonising encounter demonstrates. Kristeva notes that, 'Abjection accompanies all religious structurings and reappears, to be worked out in a new guise, at the time of their collapse.' [26] The strange thing is that in this case the rendition of the colonial encounter functions to communicate the futility of the colonisers' designs rather than its power; and, at the same time, the strength of the indigenous peoples' defiance rather than their weakness.

### Acts of civilisation

21. The Chamorros' first encounter with Spain occurred in 1521, when Magellan's ships chanced upon the archipelago in the course of the Portuguese seaman's planned circumnavigation of the world. This event proved momentous for the Spanish, who thereafter would make regular stops in the archipelago to resupply their ships that originated in Acapulco and were bound for Manila as part of the galleon trade. But the encounter was of lesser consequence for the Chamorros themselves. While the Chamorros eagerly exchanged their foodstuffs like coconuts, fish, rice and water for the Spaniards' iron implements, they limited their contacts with them to these once-a-year meetings along the coast. For a century and a half thereafter, this was the extent of Chamorro-Spanish interaction. The exceptional events during this time that punctuate Spanish historiographies—the one-year sojourn of the Discalced Franciscan Antonio de los Angeles who jumped ship in 1596 to preach to the Chamorros and the shipwreck of the galleon *Santa Margarita* off <="" of="" island=""> Rota in 1601, which included the Capuchin missionaries Juan Pobre de Zamora and Pedro de Talavera—did little to alter this meeting of equals. [27] These brief pit-stops by missionaries however, particularly that of Zamora, who wrote a fuller account of Chamorro culture than Antonio Pigafetta, Magellan's chronicler and the Capuchin's immediate ethnographic predecessor, did add further substance to the impressions of the Mariana Islands as tropically lush but without readily exploitable resources and of the Chamorros as an abject people. For what little colonial readers knew of the archipelago then, they envisioned it as a distant, ungovernable and unprofitable place. Yet even if some worthwhile mineral in particular, whether silver or gold, were to be discovered, the natives' putative 'barbarism' militated against their transformation into workers. As the Jesuit Delgado described them in a passage riddled with inaccuracies,

The natives, in their gentility, had no familiarity with the use of fire; and because of this they consumed fish and everything else they ate raw, and the remainder they left under the sun so that it would become more palatable. Their manner of dress was exactly what was given to them by nature, they did not even use the leaves from trees; even today in their homes, sowing their fields and in their travels they use the same clothes. [28]

22. This very same remoteness and simplicity of human life, when seen by eager missionaries, however, became the stuff of romance. Following Magellan's landfall, the initial, scattered attempts to Christianise the islands came to nothing, either because they never got off of the ground or because the Chamorros more simply showed no interest in the aliens' religion. Following in the path of these abortive missions, the singularly zealous Jesuit Diego Luis de San Vitores (b. 1627) embarked on a more determined, extensive campaign to Christianise the Chamorros, a cause for which he became legendarily martyred in 1672. San Vitores remains a controversial figure today, revered by some, reviled by others. [29] Nonetheless it was because of the mission that he

organised—by petitioning the Queen, soliciting and eventually securing funding, and organising a viable missionary corps that could sustain a longer-term project of proselytisation—that Spain began to establish a presence in the archipelago.

23. For all of San Vitores' undoubted sincerity in launching the mission that would turn him into an icon, not to mention the praise that continues to be heaped upon him by his apologists in the centuries since his death, it must be said that the Christianisation of the Chamorros was made possible only after decades of wrenching warfare and destruction of life, land and culture.<sup>[30]</sup> This colonial encounter that has often been discussed as primarily 'religious' in nature was at once military, political, economic and environmental. It was the defining event in a longer history which extends to the present, of what Vince Diaz terms the 'mass destruction,' actual and potential, of Chamorro society.<sup>[31]</sup> Significant for our purposes is that forms of placental praxis lay at the heart of resisting this tide of events. So that the placental political teleologies of Chamorro anticolonialism after 1668 can be understood, it bears briefly recounting the various forms of Spanish imperialism women and men sought to overcome, namely: the colonial soldiery; resettlement campaigns; attempts religious and cultural reform; the expropriation of labour; and disease.
24. The Chamorros' intrinsic antipathy for conversion to Christianity can be seen in the fact that the Spanish could not accomplish proselytisation without the force of arms. This was evident from the outset of San Vitores' mission itself. When the Jesuit arrived in the Mariana Islands in 1668, he brought with him a force of 31 soldiers in addition to a few Jesuit colleagues and their lay catechists. This small army proved insufficient, however, as Chamorros severely beat or even killed members of the contingent as the religious undertook their unsolicited work. Scarcely a year later, San Vitores requested that the Crown provision another 200 troops to suppress the Chamorros' acts of refusal. In the following three decades, this small but effective military corps, periodically resupplied and reinforced, would dutifully serve its purpose by suppressing libratory Chamorros who would not submit to Spanish rule or Christian conversion, even after the missionary himself was killed in 1672. In this way, the man who sincerely believed that the 'conversion should be made with the gentleness of the Holy Gospel and without the noise of arms and military operations,' and implored the soldiers to use violence only as a defensive measure, became principally responsible for bringing to the islands its first foreign, punitive military force in recorded history.<sup>[32]</sup> The Spanish soldiery, then, which included Indios impressed from its colonies on both sides of the Pacific, was the first, most apparent colonising force that the Chamorros sought to repel.
25. The strategic brutalisation and 'pacification' of Chamorros unwilling to submit to Spanish demands over the course of the conflict made possible a key administrative change that the missionaries sought: the *reducción*, or forced relocation into church-centred villages. 'Reducing' the population in this manner, an administrative strategy already implemented in Spain's other Pacific colonies, furthered a number of goals important to the missionaries: it brought the newly converted population under greater surveillance (thereby making it less likely for them to engage in 'sinful' behaviour, flee, or, in the worst case, rebel). It worked to facilitate their observance of daily mass or other rituals to be undertaken at the locus of the church, initiated by the sound of the church bells; and more generally it aided in fostering their new spiritual, cultural and residential identities. Moreover *reducción* as a colonial device implemented in the Mariana Islands did not only mean concentration of peoples within individual islands; it entailed the larger project of removing Chamorro bodies from the northern islands to resettle them on the island of Guam alone.<sup>[33]</sup>
26. Those who were reduced within or to Guam lost far more than the houses in which they lived or farms they tended. *Reducción* for Chamorros, in a more meaningful sense, signified a rupturing of the vital bonds that individuals and families shared with the land they had inhabited for centuries. It

eroded preexisting social bonds within existing networks of extended kin, or between classes, and functioned to replace them with individuated relationships now between priest and parishioner, through a process Michel Foucault has termed 'pastoral power.'<sup>[34]</sup> Beyond the metaphysical, the policy of *reducción* also destroyed the houses of Chamorro culture—literally. The most obvious example here is the *guma' urritao* (often translated reductively as bachelors' houses), the indigenous houses of learning that the missionaries sought to eradicate. These were places where uncles and fathers instructed young men about 'how to fish, hunt, navigate, chant, build canoes and houses, paddle, perform in combat, make tools such as spearheads, slingstones, adzes and files, and more.'<sup>[35]</sup> Additionally because adolescent men and women (from different clans) lived in the *guma' urritao*, they enjoyed the pleasures of one another. And it was *this* activity, among the many that took place on a daily basis in the *guma' urritao*, that roused the missionaries' ire—even if it did not, coincidentally, similarly rouse the ire of the soldiers, sailors, and other imperial agents who rather than object saw fit to observe and uphold indigenous Chamorro customs. Remaking village life in the Spanish-colonised Guam through *reducción* allowed the colonisers to create new institutions of inculcation, such as those housed by the church, where historic lifeways were no longer reproduced. The missionaries thus ridded themselves of these 'houses dedicated to sensuality and turpitude, where the bachelors along with a single consort, accomplice of their sins, would serve the Devil with numberless ugly doings, as in temples of abomination.'<sup>[36]</sup> Better still for the cause of cultural destruction is that these acts of psychological and cultural violence inflicted by the missionaries on their converts ensured that conversion, once it took place, would mark a definitive break from the ancestral past.

27. More basically, the Chamorros for their part did not evince any particular desire for conversion as a cultural process, of adopting the aliens' peculiar customs, or, when it came to it, sacrificing their own, in the first place. This was, after all, the reason that the missionary efforts before San Vitores had all failed. Indeed, even the few 'successes' of the fabled Jesuit's own evangelisation campaign themselves, once evaluated through a more critical lens, present more signs of the Chamorros' disfavour rather than acceptance. The warm welcome Kepuha (the indigenous leader who received the Jesuit) offered San Vitores, for instance, was less the result of the providential 'visit to these Islanders by the Blessed Virgin Mary' the missionaries perceived than a more pragmatic attempt on the chief's part to curry favour with a potentially powerful ally and supplier of scarce iron.<sup>[37]</sup> In this sense, Kepuha's taking part in the missionaries' rituals such as baptism and his building reciprocal bonds with them through the staging of events such as feasts and performances are better understood not as signs of his or his people's embrace of the new religion per se; they were instead calculated acts devised to bring into closer orbit an ally who could potentially provide him with greater resources he could then, in turn, use against any would-be local antagonists.
28. In this vein, Chamorro engagement with the missionaries more generally was rational according to local conditions in nature rather than being based on the otherworldly concerns that the missionaries presumed to animate their actions. Thus the 13,000 reported baptisms performed in the missionaries' first year of residence, while remarkable in some sense, can hardly be seen in and of themselves as a sign of any sort of meaningful or even long-lasting conversion.<sup>[38]</sup> Furthermore, as Spanish accounts themselves would show, these gains for the missionaries were evanescent. For, as many Chamorros as they converted, the missionaries provoked even more to resist them; some by seeking flight, others through violent defiance. Partly this was due to the myriad of other impositions the religious sought to impose. As no less than the Jesuit apologist Francis Hezel describes, with characteristic disdain for Chamorro culture, during the initial phase of San Vitores' mission,

Then, too, the Chamorro nobility was beginning to learn that the foreign priests would not abide by the social code that governed the inhabitants of their islands. The missionaries insisted that the dead be buried on church grounds rather than with the bones of their ancestors as Chamorro custom prescribed; they preached that the

traditional men's houses, in which bachelors regularly slept with unmarried women, were evil; and they even persisted in teaching their arcane doctrine to members of the despised low class, frequently even baptizing these people before their social betters.[\[39\]](#)

29. In this early phase of the anticolonial struggle, Chamorro women began to undertake placental political acts of resistance. In one instance, 'women took special pains to hide their infants and keep small children well out of the way of the Christians for fear that they would be baptized.' Even more conspicuous signs of Chamorro refusal were to come. In Tinian, a group of Chamorros ambushed and speared the leg of the Jesuit Luis de Morales while on his way to baptize a dying man. Another Jesuit, Luis de Medina, 'was beaten so badly that his face was swollen for weeks afterwards.' The ultimate sign of Chamorro refusal of the religion came a mere four years into the mission when a local chief, Matå'pang of Tumon, famously killed San Vitores for attempting to perform the same act upon the chief's daughter. Whether Chamorros saw these acts as undermining their traditional religion, culture, or other, it is clear that as time wore on, they largely rejected them.[\[40\]](#)
30. Less abstract and ethereal than the colonisers' religion and culture were the demands they placed on the *Indios*' labour. In the centuries since they had come to inhabit the archipelago, the Chamorros had mastered the natural environment of the Mariana Islands. It was because they were such intrepid exploiters of nature that the Chamorros, as Diaz reminds us, saved Magellan's life in 1521, simply because they had long before acquired the ability to produce surpluses of food, water and supplies, which they were then able to provide to the seaman's weary, scurvy-ridden, depleted fleet.[\[41\]](#) A century and a half later, once Spain became able to construct an administrative bureaucracy in the archipelago, complete with its governor's palace, presidios, churches and other such buildings, including the funding (however irregular) of the colonial agents required to run these institutions, the exigencies of utilising this natural inheritance as the basis for agriculturally-based, light commercial industry, which might transform the colony into an economically profitable, or at least self-sustaining place, meant that indigenous labour would have to be marshalled for new forms of work.
31. That the Spanish aliens themselves would supply the workforce was of course unthinkable. Given that Chamorros' labour was demanded, 'in exchange a few clothes and tobacco leaves' few indigenous willingly offered their services from the late 1660s onwards.[\[42\]](#) Nonetheless, as the population declined over the course of the later seventeenth century (for reasons discussed above and below), the colonisers devised schemes of taxation designed to extract labour from the indigenous peoples for the maintenance and perpetuation of the colony. And paradoxically, these forms of compulsory labour extraction became *more* severe over time as the demands of state remained constant even while the pool of labourers shrank. One official, the Jesuit procurator Joesph Calvo, described the process well.

Before, the work for all that was described was distributed among thousands of families, and now, no more than fifty are left to do the same. How could they not diminish each year! How to ignore, that when Indian women marry Indian men they have no children, or have only a few, and when Indian women marry soldiers, they have many children! To what other cause can this difference be attributed, other than the latter are exempt from work, and the former are so burdened by it, that they have no virtue left to conceive, or they intentionally sterilize themselves so as not to bear slaves for the Spanish, as they have been heard to say at some point! It is evident, then, that such a reform is not only convenient, but necessary, for the relief of the Indians, so that they do not all disappear.[\[43\]](#)

32. At a minimum, then, the daily operations of Spanish colonialism in the archipelago required a form of labour discipline so onerous that many Chamorros preferred death or, in the case of women, sterilisation or betrothal with the colonisers—the alternative being perpetual servitude and intergenerational extinction—to escape it. Here placental politics shaped both the spouses

Chamorro women chose *and* whether or not they would *elect* to have children with them—choices whose political implications I will address below. Worth noting here is that matters of work, which were of course not confined to the workplace of the incipient colonial farm alone, became arenas for the contestation of placental politics.

33. Likely the greatest force for devastation came not from Spanish weapons, reducciones, the missionaries' religious impositions, or even from their forms of coercive labour, but from their bodies—or perhaps those of the rats, pigs, or other such vectors they brought with them—which harboured pathogens such as smallpox, influenza and tuberculosis, none of which were ever known in the Mariana Islands prior to the late 1660s and for which Chamorros consequently had no immunities. As San Vitores himself put it, 'They claim that our ships, passing by their islands, left them rats, flies, mosquitos, and all their sicknesses. And they are correct in the matter of sickness, because after the ships have been in their islands they find themselves with colds and other infirmities.'[\[44\]](#) The result of the introduction of these pathogens was staggering. Spanish sources estimated a population between 40,000 and 100,000 throughout the entire archipelago (of which they reckoned 35,000 to 60,000 to reside in Guam) before 1668. Following the Spanish-Chamorro Wars from 1668 to the 1690s and the subsequent, permanent Spanish colonisation that those wars alone made possible, the Chamorro population was reported to comprise a mere 3,197 by the time of the first official census in 1710. By 1786, a miniscule 1,318 Chamorros remained on Earth. Of the many places in the western hemisphere and beyond where Spanish colonialism sowed epidemiological ruin, the Mariana Islands ranks as among the most devastated, because the population was brought to the very brink of extinction.[\[45\]](#)
34. Here it is crucial to note the timeline of events for an understanding of depopulation due to disease. In the century and a half of Spanish encounters before 1668, when over a hundred ships visited the islands briefly and a few missionaries even sojourned, there was seemingly no outbreak or spread of European disease—or at least none of which any chroniclers seemed to have taken note. This raises the interesting question of what would have happened had the San Vitores and the Jesuits not attempted to use violence to brutalise the Chamorros into submission to Spanish colonisation and destroy their preexisting culture so as to render them susceptible to proselytisation. Whether or not thousands of Chamorros would have survived, that is, not succumb to disease, had the irregular, limited encounters continued as the standard mode of interacting with the islanders from 1521 to 1668, will however remain a matter of conjecture.
35. What is beyond doubt is that the newer, more religiously, culturally, politically and even environmentally intensive form of Spanish colonialism, promoted by Jesuits like San Vitores, ensured that vectors of disease would proliferate among the Chamorro population as never before. Knowingly or not, missionary rituals such as baptism, anointing with oil, or any other such act that brought them into bodily contact with their converts, contributed to the spread of these diseases. As the historian Alexandre Coello de la Rosa puts it, with bizarre sympathy for those that brought death to the indigenous instead of the victims themselves, 'We can only imagine the problems that the missionaries encountered in Saipan, where they were not seen to bring news of eternal life, but death, for baptism, far from having them be born into a new, Christian identity, seemed to kill them.'[\[46\]](#)
36. This was not something lost to the discerning would-be converts themselves, who, even if they did not fully grasp the epidemiological implications of Spain's most consequential import, clearly understood how it was transmitted—and, more importantly, knew how to resist it. This is why, not coincidentally, many of the reprisals (i.e. the defensive killing of San Vitores) against missionaries or their acolytes occurred in direct response to threats such as baptism, which of course worked to spread disease. Chamorros who in the last century survived the Second World War recall it as a

time of incalculable suffering and horror. Yet the depopulation of the archipelago due to disease after 1668, exacerbated by the more intensive campaign to colonise, was in historical terms far, far more ruinous. Only after a sustained campaign to repopulate the archipelago in the nineteenth century, by Chamorros who had by that point acquired immunities to foreign diseases, and by bringing in Indios from the Philippines, Mexico, and elsewhere, did the local population rebound—in the twentieth century.<sup>[47]</sup> In terms of sheer numbers, no other event in the history of Micronesia has functioned to bring about the deliberate or unintended death of Chamorros than conversion by the Jesuits and its concomitant colonisation by Spain in the late-seventeenth century. In seeking to light Chamorros' path to the Kingdom of God, the missionaries had instead paved their way to the apocalypse. But as we will see, Chamorros, and particularly Chamorro women, were not unwitting passengers in this voyage.

### Weaponising the womb

37. To reiterate, the myriad forms of the Jesuit-driven, newly energised Spanish colonialism after 1668 posed a catastrophic, indeed apocalyptic, threat to the historic civilisation of the Mariana Islands. With their lifeways and continued existence rendered increasingly abject by missionary aims, the Chamorros devised a number of political and military means to combat the invaders, which I will recount here. To be sure, the Spanish by no means succeeded in destroying the culture outright. Survivors of the early colonial period ensured that prehispanic, traditional manifestations of Chamorro culture would persist long after, even into the present. This included, but was not limited to, distinctly feminine forms of Chamorro culture. Nor, of course, did each and every indigenous person view the invaders as threatening. Some, such as Kepuha, forged strategic alliance with them as a means of gaining power vis-à-vis his competitors (see above). Yet as the damage inflicted upon their living bodies and memorialised kin began to mount, many more Chamorros began to resist the Spanish through violent means. More took to fight the aliens than make political use of them. Chamorro anticolonialism during the final third of the seventeenth century was defensive in nature, devised to overcome the changes authored by the invaders. It consisted of two distinct but related forms: a more generalised, conventional form of anti-Spanish resistance that men principally employed through the means of strategy, reconnaissance and hand-to-hand combat; and second, of distinctly female forms of placental praxis, which were grounded ultimately in women's singular powers of reproduction. I will address these in turn.
38. The back and forth of punitive battles launched by the Spanish and counter offensives launched by Chamorro defenders which comprised the Spanish Chamorro Wars is recounted in some detail in a number of historical works.<sup>[48]</sup> Here, rather than relate battle after battle, episode after episode of the decades-long conflict, such as the remarkable, heroic, archipelago-wide anticolonial struggle of 1683–86, the so-called Second Great Chamorro War, in which freedom fighters from all across the several islands collaborated, coordinated and battled together as a people against the greatest threat to Chamorro lifeways in history,<sup>[49]</sup> I want instead to focus on the meaning of these wars for the Chamorros themselves as well as the rationale that underlay their resistance.
39. The power of early Chamorro anticolonialism was so inexorable and undeniable that even its opponents took notice. No better proof of this can be found than from the Spanish sources themselves. After all, what even they make clear is that Chamorro anti-Spanish acts during the later seventeenth century were both *anticolonial* and *libratory* in nature. Certainly the Jesuits, for their part, realised this, even if such acts were signs of the refusal of their mission. In Delgado's synthetic account of Spain's Pacific possessions for instance, which he intended as something of a more straightforward general history, the Jesuit makes a startling, seemingly unanticipated assertion about the nature of Chamorro resistance. He wrote,

There is in said islands a governor, which is a gainful and untroubled office, because there is little he must accomplish; all of the dwellings including those of the Spanish and people from Manila barely reach three thousand. The cause of this decline, according to what some recount, was a great epidemic for which many died; but others provide as an explanation that they were unable to endure the Spanish yoke, because of their great arrogance and haughtiness: *they would have preferred to live, as they did in their antiquity, in freedom [en su libertad] and under their barbarous customs, because of which they hang themselves and others kill themselves, and they do not lack those who flee to other distant islands* [emphasis mine].<sup>[50]</sup>

40. The rambling form of this passage is itself telling. Elsewhere in the *Historia*, Delgado shows himself to be a more thoughtful and deliberate historian, one who weighs other historians' competing explanations carefully in the pursuit of a more definitive rendering of the past. Yet in this single paragraph he meanders, from the structure of Spanish governance in the Mariana Islands, to its demographic history, to its indigenous culture. What explains this aimless writing in a work of otherwise carefully structured prose? Part no doubt arises from his perception of the abjectness of the Chamorros, their culture, and the land they inhabit. All of these pale by comparison with those of the Indios of the Philippines, who for the Jesuit, form his major concern throughout the work. A better explanation still is that the passage, as a work of history *wie es eigentlich gewesen*, inevitably, even reluctantly, recorded what was salient. What was inescapable, even for a Spanish-colonial and Jesuit-religious agent like Delgado himself—who certainly had no religious or political interest in creating an archive of the failure of his order to inspire acceptance of Spain's dominion and religion—was that colonisation provoked a libratory resistance. Like Kristeva's formulation of the corpse, Chamorro anticolonialism forms, for Delgado, an imaginary uncanniness and real threat; it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us.<sup>[51]</sup> Reiteration and further substantiation of this analysis can be found in missionary letters, reports, and histories that provided the Jesuit's source material. While for his part Delgado views the event reductively, as a sign of the Chamorros' abject nature, their 'great arrogance and haughtiness,' even he leaves little room for doubt that they fought for their continued freedom against a colonial oppressor.
41. The Chamorros' great arrogance and haughtiness, their desire to maintain their independence against an encroaching Spanish state, was most profoundly expressed by Chamorro women, who deployed community-based, psychologically suasive, and physically coercive forms of action. One placental political strategy they employed was to utilise kinship relations as a basis for the repelling of the invaders. Vince Diaz's lively rendition of an episode captured in Le Gobien's *Histoire* provides one particularly telling instance.

An example of this is found in what the French Jesuit Le Gobien called a particular 'deceit' by Chamorro women who sought to sway a Filipino commander and his Filipino troops who were themselves married to Chamorro women. The mothers of these Chamorro wives had gone to the fortress in Agaña under the pretext of bringing refreshments to their daughters. Their real purpose was to 'corrupt' their Filipino sons-in-law. The Filipino commander, a certain Masongsong, was approached by his Chamorro mother-in-law who proceeded to lecture him about how shameful it was to be the slaves of the Spaniards, to work for the people who had 'subjected their country and placed their nation in irons.' The woman also noted that the time was favourable to 'shake off the yoke' and that it would not be right for him and his wife, the woman's daughter, to die in disgrace, that is, in the service of Spain. She told him that he should kill the governor and unite 'with the Marianos who would regard him as their liberator.' What does Masongsong do? He does straight to the governor and narcs on the conspiracy. Other Filipinos under him, however, defected. Masongsong warned the governor: 'I only have one bit of advice to give you. Distrust the Filipinos in your service, for they may allow themselves to be corrupted. Double your guard. Hereafter, entrust the safety of your person only to Spaniards.' Masongsong's mother-in-law was promptly arrested.<sup>[52]</sup>

42. A superficial reading of this event would cast it as an internal family matter for Masongsong's mother-in-law, one of limited import to members their clan. Yet as we know, Chamorro kinship networks extended beyond any nuclear grouping and, of course, beyond only the community of the living. Thus, in urging that her son-in-law forge common cause with the Chamorros against the Spanish, Masongsong's mother was essentially calling upon him to uphold his obligations to his

family, and *to the culture* more broadly, the links to which his marriage to her daughter cemented. Here placental politics became manifested through the strategist's assertion of the importance of maintaining traditional bonds, through the perpetuation of the traditional culture, a realm where, it must be noted, women were arguably the principal agents.

43. The fate of Masongsong's mother-in-law was a foreshadow of what was to come. Because of the defensive structures they erected, the superior arms of which they made alacritous use, alliances with the minority of local collaborators, above all the possibility of perpetual reinforcements from Manila-bound galleons when supplies ran thin, and of course because of the diseases that continued to devour their enemies, the Spanish would eventually emerge victorious in the Spanish Chamorro Wars by the close of the century, punctuated though they were with episodes of Chamorro victory. It is in this context of increasingly dire war and decimation of the people that female anticolonialists pioneered the most powerful acts of placental politics in recorded history.
44. Aside from their participation in more conventional forms of defensive combat—perhaps through engaging in hand-to-hand fighting, certainly through authoring the quintessential acts to keep alive the daily operations of social life, and in this instance of anti-Spanish warfare operating on the 'home front' in ways not even glimpsed by the historical record but which doubtless took place—women additionally utilised a weapon that was unique by western world historical (but less by indigenous) standards and yet conventional by Chamorro ones: their wombs. Delgado describes the ways in which they did this and also explains why.

The women likewise sterilize themselves purposefully, or if they conceive, they attempt to abort [*procuran abortar*]; and some kill the children after giving birth to be able to liberate them from subjection to the Spanish [*matan los hijos después del parto por liberarlos de la sujeción de los españoles*], and this is something that cannot be found in any other part of the world, Indios who enjoy greater repose and idleness, and who neither pay tribute nor have any recognition whatsoever of God, of the Church, or of His Majesty. [53]

45. A later historian, Luís de Ibáñez y García, recounts the same phenomena, but adds a few details.

The women sterilized themselves on purpose, by throwing into the waters their own children, persuaded as they were that that early death would liberate [*redimía*] them from work and a painful life, and make them blissful and happy. So much did they abhor subjection, for it seemed to them the ultimate and most lamentable misery. [54]

46. In the crucible of the Spanish Chamorro Wars, where entire communities were dying out because of conflict, disruption and disease, connections to historic homelands were thereby severed, and more conventional forms of evasion, cooption, or reprisal failed, these series of actions formed the *ultimate* acts of colonial refusal. By making use of them, Chamorro women were, as the historian James Gelvin has put it in a different context, seeking to 'restore agency to its rightful owner.' [55] Expressing themselves through idioms of 'deep Chamorro symbolic and cultural meanings connecting notions and expectations of self in relation to land and community,' to recall DeLisle's formulation, they were reasserting their control over life through a system of reciprocal kinship relations and stewardship obligations, quite simply, yet dramatically, by cancelling the perpetuation of those lineages. [56] There was no decision that could be taken by a head clansman (*maga'lahi*), whether to go to war, to relocate the village, or other, that was as far reaching by comparison.
47. These actions transcended the momentariness of the conflict by, paradoxical though it may sound, securing the future—or positively put, knowing extinction—of later generations. Marshalling their bodies in this way, Chamorro women turned the colonial designs to reproduce Christian norms of life and afterlife on their head. As Kristeva has it, 'For the unstabilized subject who comes out of that—like a crucified person opening up the stigmata of its desiring body to a speech that structures only on condition that it let go—any signifying or human phenomenon, insofar as it is, appears in its being as abjection.' [57] Here the abject was the scream of anticolonial negation. Theirs was a

refusal that transcended not only colonialism's operations in their time but furthermore its archive. Weaponising their wombs in this way, Chamorro women in the seventeenth century made maximal use of their political powers as no other people could before or since—or, in fact, few ever would in indigenous world history.

48. Towards that end, it should be acknowledged that in this historic manifestation of placental politics, Chamorro women's efforts were successful. For all the phenomena about reproductive anticolonialism that Spanish sources failed to record, their censuses of the indigenous population make clear that the colony nearly went extinct in the century after the Spanish–Chamorro Wars. The extent to which this decline in population can be explained by factors other than contraception, abortion, or infanticide, such as disease or other, cannot be calculated. Yet there can be no question that, before 1700, women had *the* critical role in transforming the colony into a place where Chamorros could no longer be shackled. Or where, when they chose to persist, they did so on their own terms, albeit through less dramatic and more quotidian expressions of placental politics. If this outcome seems grim, one can imagine that it surely was. Fighting Spain in this way was nonetheless *less oppressive* than living under it. That reproductive anticolonials had won the battle against their colonisers can be seen in the fact that Spanish governance for the two centuries following their Pyrrhic invasion was devoted to making the Mariana Islands into a humanly sustainable place by sustaining the surviving, now disease-immune Chamorro population and by bringing in foreign settlers from the Philippines, Mexico and other colonies. [58] Understanding what transpired next is crucial. The emergent mestizo population of Chamorro, Spanish, Filipino and Mexican peoples that began to grow did not *rebuild* a fledgling colony but instead *forged an entirely new one*. [59] It can be said that by the nineteenth century, the *taotaomona* whose genealogies traced back to centuries before 1521 had largely departed, led as they were by their women warriors into a place of liberation. Aspects of their precolonial indigenous heritage would however live on, albeit in ways we are only now beginning to understand.

### The powers of abjection

49. In her essay on the politics of abortion in fin-de-siècle Guam, colonised now by a global power whose ownership and benevolence subjects it to nuclear annihilation—the United States—legal scholar Vivian Loyola Dames calls attention to the contemporary predicament in which advocates of reproductive rights find themselves. She underscores in particular how the absence of an indigenous epistemological basis for opposition has handcuffed proponents of women's corporeal sovereignty.

The framing of the abortion issue, especially in the adversarial US legal system, as a clash of individual rights made it impossible for indigenous women with different views on abortion to find an alternative discourse and common ground for affirming indigenous values and the social power of Chamorro women as a collective. Instead, women were forced to position themselves as adversaries and, according to the terms of the debate, as either pro-choice or pro-life. [60]

50. This is a far cry from the seventeenth century Mariana Islands world in which women exerted an unquestioned, natural reign over their reproductive powers, when placental politics formed a ubiquitous force in the daily operations of Chamorro society large and small. This erosion of gender egalitarianism in the archipelago serves in the final analysis as the singular monument to the eager yet inhumane—not to mention murderous on a mass scale—efforts of Spanish Jesuits, administrators and their countless acolytes drawn from the corners of the empire to erect their alien state. For the sacrifice of their own lives, and those of thousands of Chamorros who wanted nothing to do with their proselytisation, these ethnocentrists achieved a cultural sea change that has radically remade Micronesia—a place whose inhabitants once believed stood in the centre of

the world—into but another periphery of Spanish colonialism, Roman Catholicism and, since 1898, American militarism.

51. At the same time, precolonial exertions of power, particularly those expressed through placental praxis, survive into the present. Their most visible manifestation of the continuation across centuries of indigenous culture rests in the figure of the (still?) predominantly female *suruhâna*. Indeed, scholars have only begun to recover the potentialities of Chamorro women's activism to drive, inspire and inform political change, whether through placental politics, its analogues, or similar inflections. Thanks to the work of scholars such as Anne Perez Hattori, Laura Marie Torres Souder, and the aforementioned Christine Taitano DeLisle, whose scholarship has critically informed this essay among so many others, the historical lessons available to draw upon for an indigenous-inspired praxis are more widespread now than ever before.<sup>[61]</sup> In an effort to contribute to their recent critical work, which has focused mainly on the American period (1898), I have attempted in this essay to broaden the history of the possible by concentrating on the lengthier, preceding Spanish era. Towards that goal, and based on this earliest history of placental politics, I would proffer the three preliminary conclusions.
52. One is that scholars need to critically rethink both the violence of the Chamorro–Spanish colonial encounter as well as the nature of resistance it provoked. 'Critical' here is the operative word. For while the history of the Spanish Mariana Islands by no means lacks its dutiful and competent interpreters, few among them seem to grasp the larger significance of the phenomena they bring to light.<sup>[62]</sup> By any measure, the forms of Chamorro resistance in the later seventeenth century were spectacular, powerful and effective. This was even more so the case in the instances where placental politics became anticolonial. This raises further questions. Would a less brutal form of colonisation (in the eyes of Chamorros) have provoked a lesser negotiation? To what extent were these modes of resistance novel, or did they have a precolonial, that is pre-1521, genealogy? Likely they did. Even more pressing, *pace* DeLisle, is determining the extent to which forms of placental praxis have survived into the present, as they certainly did, and discerning how they might inform actions in the present day, including, but not limited to, the campaigns for independence from the US, the colonial power that today assures that the word postcolonial is a desire to be made real.
53. Another is to determine the nature of these historic forms of placental politics, particularly their geography and temporality. The general outlines are clear enough, if we widen our view to include other nearby areas of late premodern Austronesia such as the Caroline and Marshall Islands, and perhaps even farther away places such as the Philippines. It was in the Philippine region of late Austronesia for instance that scholars first noted a trajectory over the course of the *longue durée* in which a more egalitarian sexual order prior to the advent of the Spanish became supplanted, through conversion to Christianity above all, with a more patriarchal one.<sup>[63]</sup> What took place in the Mariana Islands was essentially a similar process, although the timeline and other details of course differed. A fuller examination of gender throughout the centuries of Spanish rule in its Pacific colonies from the Dominican colony in Vietnam to its other Micronesian territories can confirm, overturn, or lead us to nuance this familiar historical arc.
54. Lastly, I contend that we need to continue to rethink the master narrative about Spanish colonialism in the Mariana Islands—and indeed elsewhere—as many other scholars have been doing and continue to do. We must remain skeptical about the notion that everyone fell into line following the cessation of the Chamorro–Spanish Wars at the close of the seventeenth century. As I have shown, Chamorros resisted the multiple processes of Spain's colonisation and subjugation in the most comprehensive ways humanly available to them. Thus the processes of building an administrative state, proselytising the people, and Hispanicising Micronesian culture, must be

subjected to similar scrutiny. Certainly it would be an inestimable oversimplification to state, as the authors of a recent volume on the Spanish Pacific have, that, 'On Guam, in the eighteenth century, Chamorros *learned* how to be subjects of the Spanish monarchy.'<sup>[64]</sup> We should not misread the history of a people who had just successfully waged existential war against the colonisers who formed the greatest threat to their lifeways in history, and who were memorialised by those same colonisers in text as abject, as one of subservience and acquiescence; colonialist mistakes do not bear reiteration. After all,

If it be true that the abject simultaneously beseeches and pulverizes the subject, one can understand that it is experienced at the peak of its strength when that subject, weary of fruitless attempts to identify with something on the outside, finds the impossible within; when it finds that the impossible constitutes its very being, that it is none other than abject.<sup>[65]</sup>

55. The nature of placental politics, expressed as reproductive anticolonialism before, during and after the late-seventeenth century, makes unmistakable that Chamorros were reluctant learners of Spanish lessons.

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## Notes

[1] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, New York: Columbia University Press, 1982, pp. 8–9.

[2] [Christine Taitano DeLisle](#), 'A history of Chamorro nurse-midwives in Guam and a "placental politics" for indigenous feminism,' *Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific* 37 (Mar. 2015) (accessed 28 Aug. 2018).

[3] DeLisle, 'A History of Chamorro Nurse-Midwives in Guam.'

[4] DeLisle, 'A History of Chamorro Nurse-Midwives in Guam.'

[5] Francisco Olive y García, *Islas Marianas. Lijeros apuntes acerca de las mismas, porvenir á que pueden y deben aspirar, y ayuda que ha de prestar la administración para conseguirlo*, Manila, Imp. y lito. de M. Perez, 1887, pp. 9, 16; Rainer Buschmann, Edward Slack and James Tueller have found a similarly antinomic quality in Olive y Garcia's text. See Rainer F. Buschmann, Edward R. Slack Jr. and James B. Tueller, *Navigating the Spanish Lake, The Pacific in the Iberian World, 1521–1898*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2014, p. 108.

[6] Ranajit Guha, 'The prose of counter-insurgency,' in *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, vol. 2, ed. Ranajit. Guha, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983, pp. 1–42.

[7] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 3.

[8] David J. Weber, *Bárbaros: Spaniards and Their Savages in the Age of Enlightenment*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004.

[9] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 2.

[10] Alexandre Coello de la Rosa, *Jesuits at the Margins: Missions and Missionaries in the Marianas, 1668–1769*, New York: Routledge, 2016, pp. 34–35; Lawrence J. Cunningham, *Ancient Chamorro Society*, Honolulu: Bess Press, 1992, pp. 179–83.

[11] Diego Luis de Sanvitores, *Noticia de los progressos de nuestra Santa Fe, en las Islas Marianas, llamadas antes de los ladrones, y de el fruto que han hecho en ellas el padre Diego Luis de Sanvitores, y sus companeros, de la*

*Compañia de Jesus, desde 15 mayo de 1669 hasta 28 de abril de 1670 sacada de las cartas, que ha escrito el padre Diego Luis de Sanvitores, y sus compañero*, Madrid: s.n., c. 1671, p. 4.

[12] Michael Lujan Bevacqua, 'Transmission of Christianity into Chamorro culture,' *Guampedia* (2009–2019) (accessed 26 Aug. 2018); Coello de la Rosa, *Jesuits at the Margins*, p. 9; Laura Thompson, *The Native Culture of the Marianas Islands*, Honolulu: Bernice P. Bishop Museum, 1945, p. 14. One consequence here is that the historians who consult primary documentation and the anthropologists who seek insights from their informants necessarily draw upon information that itself was shaped by the colonial encounter and its legacies, a necessity of research that quite certainly worked to obscure preexisting social systems or aspects of them.

[13] Scott Russell, *Tiempon I Manmofo'na: Ancient Chamorro Culture and History of the Northern Mariana Islands*, Saipan: Saipan CNMI Division of Historic Preservation, 1998, pp. 139–52; Cunningham, *Ancient Chamorro Society*, pp. 165–76.

[14] Tricia Lizama, 'Yo'ámte: A deeper type of healing: Exploring the state of Indigenous Chamorro healing practices,' *Pacific Asia Inquiry*, 5(1): (2014): 97–106.

[15] Lizama, 'Yo'ámte'; Robert F. Rogers, *Destiny's Landfall: A History of Guam*, rev. ed., Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011, p. 255; Russell, *Tiempon I Manmofo'na*, p. 175; and Cunningham, *Ancient Chamorro Society*, pp. 101–2.

[16] Cunninmgham, *Ancient Chamorro Society*, p. 101.

[17] Major works on the *baylan/asog* (female and male transvestite shaman) include: Carolyn Brewer, *Shamanism, Catholicism, and Gender Relations in Colonial Philippines, 1521–1685*, Burlington: Ashgate, 2004; 'From Animist "priestess" to Catholic priest: The re/gendering of religious roles in the Philippines, 1521–1685,' in *Other Pasts: Women, Gender and History in Early Modern Southeast Asia*, ed. Barbara Watson Andaya, Honolulu: Center for Southeast Asian Studies, University of Hawai'i, 2000, pp. 69–86; and '[Baylan, asog, transvestism, and sodomy: Gender, sexuality and the sacred in early colonial Philippines](#),' *Intersections: Gender, History and Culture in the Asian Context* 2 (May 1999), accessed 2 Jan. 2014; Alfred W. McCoy, 'Baylan: Animist religion and Philippine peasant ideology,' *Philippine Quarterly of Culture and Society* 10(3) (Sept. 1982): 141–94; Evelyn Tan Cullamar, *Babaylanism in Negros, 1896–1907*, Quezon City: New Day, 1986.

[18] Cunninmgham, *Ancient Chamorro Society*, p. 101.

[19] A useful description of the ceremony can be found in Cunningham, *Ancient Chamorro Society*, p. 101. For further information on marriages, I have also relied on Russell, *Tiempon I Manmofo'na*, pp. 141–42, 161–62.

[20] Juan Pobre de Zamora, *Historia de la Pérdida y Descubrimiento del Galeón San Felipe*, ed. Jesús Martínez Pérez, Avila: Institución Gran Duque de Alba de la Excm. Diputación Provincial de Avila, 1997, p. 447. The portions of this text that deal with the Mariana Islands have been translated by Marjorie Driver. See her 'Fray Juan Pobre de Zamora and His Account of the Mariana Islands,' *Journal of Pacific History*, 18(3) (Jul. 1983): 198–216; and 'Fray Juan Pobre de Zamora: Hitherto unpublished accounts of his residence in the Mariana Islands,' *Journal of Pacific History*, 23(1) (Apr. 1988): 86–94. Her rendition of this passage appears on p. 213 of the first piece.

[21] Zamora, *Historia de la Pérdida y Descubrimiento del Galeón San Felipe*, p. 447.

[22] See Francisco de Florencia, *Exemplar vida, y gloriosa mverte por Christo del fervoroso F. Lvis de Medina de la Compañia de Iesvs: que de la religiosa provincia de Andaluzia passò a la conquista espiritual de las Islas de los Ladrones, que oy se llaman Marianas, el año de 1667, y en ellas se coronò su predicación con su martirio el año de 1670*, Sevilla: Iuan Francisco de Blas, 1673, pp. 43–44; Francisco Garcia, *Vida y martyrio de el venerable padre Diego de Sanvitores, de la Compañia de Jesus, primer apostol de la islas Marianas, y sucessos de estas islas, desde el año de mil seiscientos y sesenta y ocho, asta el de mil seiscientos y ochenta y uno*, Madrid: J. Garcia Infanzon, 1683, p. 202; Francisco Garcia, *Istoria della conversione alla nostra santa fede dell'Isole Mariane: dette prima de ladroni nella vita, predicatione, e morte gloriosa per Christo del venerabile P. Diego Lvigi di Sanvitores, e d'altri suoi Compagni della Compagnia di Gesu*, trans. Ambrosio Ortiz, Napoli: Camillo Cauallo e Michele Luigi Mutij, 1686, p. 182; Gabriel de Aranda, *Vida, y gloriosa muerte del v. padre Sebastian de Monroy, religioso de la Compañia de Jesus: que murió dilatando la Fè alanceado de los barbaros en las Islas Marianas*, Seville: Thomas Lopez de Haro, 1690, pp. 217–18; Charles Le Gobien, *Histoire des isle Marianes*, Paris: Chez Nicolas Pepie, ruë S. Jacques, au grand Saint Basile, au dessus de la fontaine de S. Severin, 1700, pp. 59–62; and V. Muñoz Barreda, *La Micronesia española, ó Los archipólago de Marianas, Palaos, y Carolinas*, Manila: Tipo. Amigos del País, 1894, pp. 59–60.

- [23] Sanvitores, *Noticia de los progresos de nuestra Santa Fe*, unnumbered, pp. 7–8.
- [24] Sanvitores, *Noticia de los progresos de nuestra Santa Fe*, unnumbered, p. 8.
- [25] Le Gobien, *Histoire des isle Marianes*, p. 61.
- [26] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 17.
- [27] Coello de la Rosa, *Jesuits at the Margins*, pp. 25, 182.
- [28] Delgado, *Historia general sacro-profana, política y natural*, p. 115.
- [29] Cf. for example, the hagiographic prefatory portions of the English translation of Garcia, *Vida y martirio de el venerable padre Diego de Sanvitores*; Francisco Garcia, *The Life and Martyrdom of the Venerable Father Diego Luis de San Vitores*, trans. Margaret M. Higgins, Felicia Plaza and Juan M.H. Ledesma, and ed. James A. McDonough, Mangilao: Micronesian Area Research Center, University of Guam, 2004; with the Diaz's more subversive account, Vince M. Diaz, *Repositioning the Missionary: Rewriting the Histories of Colonialism, Native Catholicism, and Indigeneity in Guam*, Honolulu: Univesity of Hawai'i Press, 2010.
- [30] Rogers, *Destiny's Landfall*, chap. 4. See also [Cynthia Ross Wiecko](#), 'Jesuit missionaries as agents of empire: The Spanish-Chamorro War and ecological effects of conversion on Guam, 1668–1769,' *World History Connected* (Oct. 2013), (accessed 25 Aug. 2018); Francis X. Hezel, *From Conquest to Colonization: Spain in the Mariana Islands, 1690–1740*, Saipan: Division of Historic Preservation, 1989.
- [31] Diaz, *Repositioning the Missionary*, p. 207.
- [32] Francis X. Hezel, 'From conversion to conquest: The early Spanish Mission in the Marianas,' *Journal of Pacific History* 17(3) (1982): 115–37, p. 122.
- [33] Hezel, *From Conquest to Colonization*, pp. 2–14; Augusto de Viana, *In the Far Islands: The Role of Natives from the Philippines in the Conquest, Colonization and Repopulation of the Mariana Islands, 1668–1903*, Manila: University of Santo Tomas Press, 2004, pp. 33–36.
- [34] Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977–1978*, New York: Palgrave, 2007, pp. 174–85.
- [35] [Kelly G. Marsh and Brian Muna](#), 'Guma' Uritao,' *Guampedia*, 2009–2019 (accessed 28 Aug. 2018).
- [36] Antonio Xaramillo to the King, in *History of Micronesia: A Collection of Source Documents. Volume 7: More Turmoil in the Marianas, 1679–1683*, trans. Rodrigue Lévesque, Gatineu: Lévesque Publications, 1992, p. 307.
- [37] Garcia, *Vida y martiriyo*, p. 207.
- [38] The long term processes of an Austronesian people's conversion to a new religion and culture are discussed in John N. Schumacher, *Growth and Decline: Essays on Philippine Church History*, Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2009.
- [39] Hezel, *From Conquest to Colonization*, p. 120.
- [40] Hezel, *From Conquest to Colonization*, pp. 116–23.
- [41] Vince Diaz, 'Bye bye Ms. American pie: The historical relations between Chamorros and Filipinos and the American dream,' *Isla: A Journal of Micronesian Studies* 3(1) (1995): 147–60, p. 149.
- [42] Coello de la Rosa, *Jesuits at the Margins*, p. 268.
- [43] Petition of Fr. José Calvo, Jesuit Procurator General for the Philippines, in *History of Micronesia: A Collection of Source Documents. Volume 13: Failure at Ulithi Atoll, 1727–1746*, trans. Rodrigue Lévesque, Gatineu: Lévesque Publications, 1999, p. 592.

- [44] Sanvitores, *Noticia de los progresos de nuestra Santa Fe*, ff. 5–5.
- [45] I have taken these figures from Wiecko, 'Jesuit missionaries as agents of empire'; see also, de Viana, *In the Far Islands*, chaps. 2–3.
- [46] Coello de la Rosa, *Jesuits at the Margins*, p. 88.
- [47] Wiecko, 'Jesuit missionaries as agents of empire.'
- [48] General overviews can be found in Rogers, *Destiny's Landfall*, chap. 4; Paul Carano and Pedro C. Sanchez, *A Complete History of Guam*, Rutland, VT: Charles E. Tuttle, 1968; and Coello de la Rosa, *Jesuits at the Margins*, pp. 3, 7, 38, 57, 112, 304.
- [49] Coello de la Rosa, *Jesuits at the Margins*, pp. 87–95.
- [50] Delgado, *Historia general sacro-profana, política y natural*, p. 115.
- [51] Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror*, p. 4.
- [52] Diaz, 'Bye bye Ms. American pie,' pp. 151–52.
- [53] Delgado, *Historia general sacro-profana, política y natural*, p. 115.
- [54] Luís de Ibáñez y García, *Historia de las islas Marianas con su derrotero, y de las Carolinas y Palaos, desde el descubrimiento por Magallanes en el año 1521, hasta nuestros días*, Granada: P.V. Sabatel, 1886, p. 69.
- [55] James Gelvin, 'Al-Qaeda and anarchism: A historian's reply to terrorology,' *Terrorism and Political Violence* 20(4) (Oct. 2008): 563–81, p. 567.
- [56] DeLisle, 'A history of Chamorro nurse-midwives in Guam.'
- [57] Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror*, p. 27.
- [58] Coello de la Rosa, *Jesuits at the Margins*, chap. 6; de Viana, *In the Far Islands*, chap. 3.
- [59] Bevacqua, 'Transmission of Christianity into Chamorro culture.'
- [60] Vivian Loyola Dames, 'Chamorro women, self-determination, and the politics of abortion in Guam,' in *Asian/Pacific Islander American Women: A Historical Anthology*, ed. Shirley Hune and Gail M. Nomura, New York: New York University Press 2003, pp. 365–82, p. 378.
- [61] Major works include: Anne Perez Hattori, *Colonial Dis-Ease: Us Navy Health Policies and the Chamorros of Guam, 1898–1941*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004; Laura Marie Torres Souder, *Daughters of the Island: Contemporary Chamorro Women Organizers of Gaum*, New York: University Press of America, 1992; DeLisle, 'A History of Chamorro Nurse-Midwives in Guam'; "'Guamanian-Chamorro by birth but American patriotic by choice": Subjectivity and performance in the life of Agueda Iglesias Johnston,' *Amerasia Journal* 37(3) (2011): 61–75; 'Navy wives/Native lives: The cultural and historical relations between American naval wives and Chamorro women in Guam, 1898-1945,' PhD dissertation, University of Michigan, 2008; 'Tumuge' Pâpa' (Writing it Down): Chamorro midwives and the delivery of Native history,' *Pacific Studies* 30(1–2) (Mar.–Jun. 2007): 20–32. See also Cecilia Bamba, Laura Souder, and Judy Tompkins, eds., *Women of Guam: The Guam Women's Conference*, n.p. 1977.
- [62] Here I am thinking about the work of Francis X. Hezel, *From Conquest to Colonization*; Marjorie Driver, 'Fray Juan Pobre de Zamora and His Account of the Mariana Islands,' and 'Juan Pobre de Zamora: Hitherto unpublished accounts of his residence in the Mariana Islands'; and Laura Thompson, *The Native Culture of the Marianas Islands* in particular.
- [63] Brewer, *Shamanism, Catholicism and Gender Relations in Colonial Philippines*.
- [64] Buschmann, Slack, and Tueller, *Navigating the Spanish Lake*, p. 97.

[65] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 5.

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