

A Borrowed Land

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A Borrowed Land, by Peter Onedera. University of Guam Press, 2024.

Peter Onedera's *A Borrowed Land* is a poignant exploration of identity, belonging, and historical trauma on Guam. The novel follows Zenpei, Jiro, and Onedera himself, each grappling with the complexities of their Japanese-CHamoru identity amid shifting political and cultural landscapes. Onedera's commitment to preserving his family's history through oral testimonies and archival gaps offers a moving account of resilience. The novel reflects on colonialism, racial tensions, and the painful legacies of war, yet ultimately gestures toward healing and reconciliation. Onedera's narrative is both an act of cultural preservation and a meditation on the enduring struggle for belonging in a post-colonial Pacific.

Onedera's novel begins with a reflection on the practice of "talk story," an oral tradition that not only provides the framework for Onedera's narrative but also serves as a vehicle for recovering and preserving histories of the Guam Nikkei during World War II. The book opens with Onedera's childhood memories of post-war Guam, where tensions between Japanese-CHamoru families and their neighbors still linger. In the preface, Onedera recalls a village neighbor frequently shouting obscenities at him as he walked by, later revealing that the man's hostility stemmed from witnessing the brutal beheadings of his family by Japanese soldiers during the war. This encounter signals the central tension that propels the narrative, and it is in this deeply conflicted space that Nikkei families occupied during and after the war, where cultural identity became fraught and often dangerous.

A Borrowed Land is not just a historical novel, but a complex meditation on identity and belonging. It follows three generations of the Onedera family: Zenpei, Onedera's grandfather, whose immigration from Japan and assimilation into Chamoru culture unfolds sometime before 1900; Jiro, Zenpei's grandson, who endures the horror of Japanese occupation and internment during the war; and Onedera himself, who seeks to reconcile his Japanese-CHamoru identity while documenting and preserving his family's history. The book, sectioned into four parts, begins with the inspiration behind the project, which grew out of Onedera's childhood experiences with racial tension, decades of conversations with family members and elders, and a class assignment at the University of Guam in 1987 that led him to gather stories from 14 issei and nisei- all stories that formed the roots of *A Borrowed Land*.

The second part of the book is told through Zenpei Jito Onodera, the family patriarch, who arrives in Guam from Tochigi-ken, Japan sometime before 1900. Zenpei, recruited to work in the copra plantations in Togcha (south) and Hinapsan (north), quickly assimilates into CHamoru culture- learning the language, converting to Catholicism, and marrying Nānan Li'a' (CHetton-Baliteres). This section traces Zenpei's journey, highlighting his initial impression of the island, experiences working under Tåtān Kācha (Jose Katsuji Shimizu), learning Chamorro, finding love and raising a family with Nānan Li'a. Zenpei's story portrays how the Nikkei are respected as contributing members of the CHamoru community and details the cultural blending that occurs before the onset of the war. For example, some fervently believed in CHamoru spirits like *duhendes* and *taotaomona* but also held onto Buddhist rituals. This balance foreshadows the difficulties that the family will face as political tensions grow. Although the narrative is markedly strong in male characters, we do get glimpses of women like Masumi Sasakura, a *maiko* in Japan who moves to Guam prewar and establishes a retail business in Tamuning.

Part Three begins with Zenpei's grandson. Enter Jiro- born in 1930 and raised by his grandparents, Jiro lives through the Japanese occupation on Guam. This section

contains poignant scenes of he and others being publicly kicked out of wedding receptions, name called, ridiculed, and ignored at social gatherings as rumors spread of a Japanese invasion. For fear of retribution, many repress the Japanese language and even change their surnames. And on an island where the first question is always, “What’s your last name?,” this is particularly telling of the ostracization that they faced. Jiro then recounts the horror of the Japanese invasion: “The families were instructed to always applaud with masked expressions of joy, while deep inside they were remorseful, sad, in despair, and sorrowed. Nikkei families were summoned to witness parades, but also, beheadings” (130). As war progresses, so does the brutality of the Japanese commanders; the bombing of Sumai, a forced *seppuku* ritual of twenty issei, and the march to the Manenggon concentration camp where approximately 18,000 CHamorus are forced north (many die on the way) to labor in Japan’s last-ditch effort to maintain control of the island. Following the U.S. bombings that flatten the island, Jiro depicts the internment camps that the U.S. build to hold all Nikkei families. Reminiscent of Miné Okubo’s account of the internment camps in Utah and California (*Citizen 13660*) and Mitsuye Yamada’s *Camp Notes and Other Poems*, Guam Nikkei were also forced into stockades with name patches. The difference here is that these camps were set up *after* the war had ended further distancing Guam from the events occurring stateside.

Yet it is in the book’s post-war chapters that Onedera’s narrative achieves its greatest power. The multi-generational trauma, passed down from Zenpei to his descendants, resonates with a quiet devastation, highlighting the lingering aftershocks of war. The fourth part of the book focuses on Onedera’s own experiences as he grapples with his identity as a Japanese-Chamoru and the difficulty of trying to piece together some semblance of familial history. Discrepancies in census documentation due to the infancy of English in the 1920s and the singed state of Guam post bombardment resulted in a paucity of records from this period. Yet, it is a well-crafted narrative to fill this silence in the archive.

As witness to the boom in Japanese tourism in the early 90s and into the 2000s, it is a marvel to think that just sixty years prior, the same island had been ravaged by war with families like the Onedaras forced into stockades, torn between two identities, and vilified by both sides. While the contrast between the island's history and its current reality is striking, *A Borrowed Land* ends in a sort of reconciliation. In his final reflections, Onedera writes of connecting his dual identity as both CHamoru and Japanese, symbolized by his journey to Japan to visit with long-lost relatives. They work to piece together a family tree filled with *familia siha* all with starkly different experiences but connected through ancestors who were willing to fight to keep their last name alive.

It is Onedera's neighbor who yells "you Japs are all living on Guam on borrowed land that you stole," which begs the larger question of how much of yourself, and of your family, do you have to give to belong to this sacred place? In one chapter of *Navigating CHamoru Poetry*, Craig Santos Perez concludes that Onedera's poetry embodies the structure of a latte stone and thus can be theorized as an architectural space that rearticulates guma' latte housing design, serving as a narrative home for CHamoru cultural identity. One poem in *Tamanu na Ina*, "Tinaotao," features *nāya* (yet; for a moment) style stanzas in which we get glimpses or impressions of select people in his life. But in *A Borrowed Land*, we see Zenpei and Jiro as fully fleshed out characters each with a fierce determination to remain in the place of the latte, even if it may result in death. Still, even as he traces this generational determination, Onedera acknowledges a futility in tracing and an acceptance to flux and unity. He concludes, "Time may erase all these distinctions, and we will all just be Guamanians" (187).

For the Nikkei and others, Guam was both a home and a place where they were never fully accepted, a land they had to continually prove their right to live. The title also speaks to the broader history of colonization in the Pacific, where indigenous peoples have long struggled to reclaim their land and identity from foreign powers. Here, Onedera does not attempt to sanitize the pain and trauma of his ancestors' experiences,

nor does he shy away from the complexities of identity in a post-colonial Pacific. Instead, he invites the reader into the uncertainty, the unresolved tensions that still linger today. In one of the final scenes, Onedera reflects on a childhood game they used to play. For him, it “wasn’t cowboys versus Indians, but Americans against Japanese” (161). It is a haunting image, one that neglects CHamorus and others living on the island caught in the crossfire and it encapsulates the confusion of growing up in a place where the scars of war are never far from reality.

Perhaps the most assuring takeaway from this book is how Onedera demonstrates what true indigenous research looks like. It means meeting his interviewees where they are, speaking in fluent CHamoru, attending multiple memorial services and countless gatherings throughout his lifetime, it means listening, patience, a readiness to meet a range of interviewee emotions from their trauma, documentation with whatever means, and it means the utmost *respetu* to tell the story of Guåhan through the voices of those who lived through this tumultuous time, most of whom have since passed away.

Onedera’s commitment to recovering the voices of his ancestors and amplifying the stories of Guam’s Nikkei is both an act of defiance and a gesture of deep respect. In this way, the book serves as a reminder that in the Pacific, the land and the *people* are history. Talking story is not just a way of preserving history but a means of healing, of bridging the gaps between past and present, between Japanese and CHamoru, between the living and the dead.

Works Cited

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