

Floating Island Reflections: **Relationalities from** **Oceania and** **Manna-hata**

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Who but a horizon so keenly feels how we are kept at
each other's distance?

Because much more than wind carries so many of us away
from our islands. Because we are made to consider our
oceans as walls.

...

The salt in our blood carries droplets of the ocean. No
matter where we are, inside us is a liquid web connecting
our beating hearts.

I am quiet so I can perceive your tugs, the delicate density
of your tangles.

— *Lehua M. Taitano,*
“A Love Letter to the Chamoru People
in the Twenty-first Century”

These excerpts from queer Chamoru poet and artist, Lehua M. Taitano mark horizon, distance, islands, oceans, and connections—they weave complexity of belonging to self, place/space, and people.¹ Felt experience conveys movement under constraint (“away from our islands,” “kept at each other's distance”) and barriers (“oceans as



Figure 1. Robert Smithson, *Floating Island to Travel Around Manhattan Island*, 1970/2005, barge with earth, trees, and rocks from Central Park. Produced by Minetta Brook in collaboration with the Whitney Museum of American Art. On view September 17–25, 2005. Photo: Jane Cohan, courtesy James Cohan, New York. © 2019 Holt/Smithson Foundation / Licensed by VAGA at ARS, NY.

walls”); while oceanic bodies (“salt in our blood,” “inside us is a liquid web”) comprise our relations (“no matter where we are,” “connecting our beating hearts”) that freely traverse a close space (“your tugs,” “your tangles”). This poem resonates with me as I consider Robert Smithson’s *Floating Island* visual art project in relation to archipelagic and oceanic thinking (see Figure 1), specifically as I apply theories of *etak* (moving islands, the triangulation developed by traditional Carolinian seafarers) to examine Smithson’s work.² I also hold these poetic and visual artifacts together to reflect on how they rhetorically engage connection and motion and to map some relationalities between Manna-hata (the Lenape word for “island of many hills”) and Oceania.³

I began writing this reflection after traveling to the United Nations Headquarters in Manna-hata for meetings of the UN Special Political and Decolonization Committee, in October 2018. As a petitioner speaking for decolonization of Guåhan/Guam, I was struck by how these places and peoples (the Chamoru and Lenape) are profoundly connected through colonial experiences and mistranslations, through ocean, and as islands comprising archipelagos.⁴ These connections, relations, and waterways matter.

Archipelagic Thinking: Moving Islands

Filipino and Pohnpeian scholar Vicente M. Diaz argues for a “critical rethinking of islands” from Indigenous cartographies, explaining traditional voyaging in the Pacific provides an “archipelagic way of apprehending self and space” that inform “practices of mobility and movement.”⁵ Other Indigenous scholarship also argues land and ocean are creatively articulated—understood as archipelagic, fluid, moving, relational, and storied.⁶ Drawing from voyaging and seafaring traditions helps to rethink land archipelagically, to examine archipelagic relationalities.⁷ These ideas invite connections with voyaging and seafaring traditions of Oceania to rethink land and consider archipelagic relationalities.

The theorization of moving islands disrupts conceptions of land as fixed and stable; for example, it “posits the canoe as stationary, and the islands move on the sea around it.”⁸ These approaches index the ocean as a *pathway* (or, as Taitano puts it, “a liquid web”) connecting islands, rather than a barrier between islands (“because we are made to consider our oceans as walls”).⁹ Significantly, *Floating Island* centers processes of movement to deepen relationships among islands.

Floating Island

In 1970, Smithson developed the project concept, intended as an “homage to Central Park” that “offers a displacement of the park—itsself a man-made creation from its natural habitat.”¹⁰ Displacement expresses movement of something from its original position/place (the park) and also articulates how objects float (the barge). The former meaning of the park’s “displacement” reverberates with Taitano’s reality of distance for Pacific Islanders “because much more than wind carries so many of us away from

our islands.” As the Lenape territory of New York City faces a rapidly growing Pacific Islander and Native Hawaiian population (a figure that more than doubled in 2018), it reflects Oceania’s legacies and continued practices of movement across land/water.¹¹

Smithson’s *Floating Island* invites us to rethink land archipelagically and read it rhetorically through the theory of etak (moving islands). The barge at once represents an island that traverses a watery “field” or “terrain” of the Hudson/East River. It also signals and challenges understanding of lands, such as Manna-hatta, as fixed. The juxtaposition between the barge and the adjacent landscape reveals a parallelism where one seems to be a larger replica of the other—both are landscapes filled with rocks, native trees, and shrubs. Both “islands *are* moving, tectonically and culturally” (emphasis in original).¹² The barge island physically moves by the power of the tugboat guiding its travels across the water. From the perspective of etak, we might imagine the tugboat as a canoe—remaining stationary while the islands (Manna-hata and the *Floating Island* barge) move around it. We could imagine the tugboat ropes as forming the lines for a sail on a traditional canoe. The tugboat (or canoe) is navigating and triangulating its position in relation to the *Floating Island*.

Manna-hata also *moves* as it supplies material for other spaces—for instance, providing the “trees common to the New York Region” that were lifted and transported (displaced) onto the barge.¹³ The image’s industrial elements (i.e., the tugboat, the barge, the docked vessel) sharply contrast the foliage covering the “fabricated island” barge and the vibrant trees and plants on Manna-hata. This example suggests mastery or control over the environment as the tugboat pulls the island, with hard lines between water and land. Yet another interpretation is that it signals navigation and relationality.

Following theories of etak/moving islands and the interconnectedness of ocean, land, and sky offers a compelling reading of Smithson’s project. Reflecting on legacies of mobility, relationality, and traversal demonstrates how land itself is not fixed, but rather dynamic and moving—for both Manna-hata and *Floating Island*. Archipelagic thinking opens up ways of processing movements and our commitments to place and people. It offers an homage to our relationalities, consideration of movement/displacement, and a challenge to colonial continental logics. These reflections and flows continue—as the closing of Taitano’s poem reminds us—“[u]ntil we can gaze together upon a horizon full of sails.”¹⁴

Notes

¹ Lehua M. Taitano, *Inside Me an Island* (Cincinnati: Word Tech Editions, 2018), 15, 17. See also Taitano’s website at <https://lehuamtaitano.com/>.

² Vicente M. Diaz, "Voyaging for Anti-Colonial Recovery: Austronesian Seafaring, Archipelagic Rethinking, and the Re-Mapping of Indigeneity," *Pacific Asia Inquiry* 2, no. 1 (Fall 2011): 25–26.

³ Joanne Barker, "Territory as Analytic: The Dispossession of Lenapehoking and the Subprime Crisis," *Social Text* 36, no. 2 (2018): 27.

⁴ Louella Losinio, "Chamoru Women Discuss Island Issues at UN," *The Guam Daily Post*, October 12, 2018, https://www.postguam.com/news/local/chamoru-women-discuss-island-issues-at-un/article_93ce8a06-cd1e-11e8-bdee-2f6bfe5efe45.html.

⁵ Vicente M. Diaz, "No Island is an Island," in *Native Studies Keywords*, eds. Stephanie Nohelani Teves, Andrea Smith, and Michelle H. Raheja (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2015), 90–91.

⁶ Tiara R. Na'puti, "Archipelagic Rhetoric: Remapping the Marianas and Challenging Militarization from 'A Stirring Place,'" *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 16, no. 1 (2019): 9–10; Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, "Land as Pedagogy: Nishnaabeg Intelligence and Rebellious Transformation," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education, and Society* 3, no. 3 (2014): 8–9.

⁷ Brian Russell Roberts and Michelle Stephens, "Archipelagic American Studies and the Caribbean," *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 5, no. 1 (2013): n.p.

⁸ Diaz, "No Island Is an Island," 98.

⁹ Taitano, *Inside Me an Island*, 17, 15.

¹⁰ Balmori Associates, "Smithson Floating Island," Balmori Portfolio, 2005, <http://www.balmori.com/portfolio/smithson-floating-island>.

¹¹ Chris Fuchs, "U.S.'s Pacific Islander Community is Growing Fast, but Advocates Worry the Census Won't Count Them," *NBC News*, May 29, 2018, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/u-s-s-pacific-islander-community-growing-fast-advocates-worry-n876051>

¹² Vicente M. Diaz, "Voyaging for Anti-Colonial Recovery," 25–26.

¹³ "Smithson Floating Island," Balmori Portfolio, Balmori, <http://www.balmori.com/portfolio/smithson-floating-island>.

¹⁴ Taitano, *Inside Me an Island*, 18.

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