Placental Politics: CHamoru Women, White Womanhood, and Indigeneity under U.S. Colonialism

Reviewed by LEIANA SAN AGUSTIN NAHOLOWA'A

Placental Politics: CHamoru Women, White Womanhood, and Indigeneity under U.S. Colonialism, by Christine Taitano DeLisle. University of North Carolina Press, 2021. ISBN: 978-1-4696-5270-2, 297 pages (paperback).

Cracking Open Women's History in Twentieth-Century Guåhan

"Where were you born?" I emerged in the "Old GMH," when Guam Memorial Hospital was situated on the cliff above Hilton Hotel, a site now nurtured by CHamoru cultural practitioners and artists for the benefit of the local community. This area is Tomhom (Tumon), but my official documents underscore Tamuning, or Oka Tamuning, or *Tamuneng* in the reclamation of Indigenous place names. While reading Christine Taitano DeLisle's *Placental Politics: CHamoru Women, White Womanhood, and Indigeneity under U.S. Colonialism in Guam*, I experienced a kind of loneliness when reflecting about this coastal and now touristy area of the island that is my birthplace because I have no ancestral connections to the land that I know of. I might feel more grounded if I was born in Dédidu (Dededo) where I grew up. Millennia of CHamoru people before the advent of hospitals were born at home in i Tåno' Låguas yan Gåni (Islas Marianas) with the support of ná'fafañågu, or midwives, more commonly known as pattera, from the Spanish word partera. After the home birth of a child, the pattera held "the obligation of planting the ga'chong i patgon [placenta] in order to bind children to their proper places of belonging and kinship and protect them from harm" (39). In this contemporary literary space that surrounds Guåhan history, *Placental Politics* begins with the work of pattera and takes readers back to other birthplaces that predate GMH – the Susana Hospital, in Hagåtña, the birthplace of CHamoru modernity – and other historical places that many today can only vaguely recollect in stories from their elders.

Structurally, the book reminds me of a husked ripe niyok. The thick outer husk comprises the sections that surround its four chapters:

preface, introduction, conclusion, glossary, notes, bibliography, and index. DeLisle's journey in this project began with her work for the Political Status Education Coordinating Commission (PSECC) in the Government of Guam (GovGuam) where she researched and wrote for the Hale'-ta Series, an iconic collection of books. Citing Anne Perez Hattori, DeLisle writes how Indigenous CHamoru perspectives of history and storytelling, "including the Hale'-ta series, has for the most part 'perpetuated the Western model of history as a patriarchal, nation-state story of progress and development'" (xiii). Navigating within this masculine-dominated culture that perpetuated the exclusion of the feminine in CHamoru history, whether written by white or Indigenous CHamoru authors, DeLisle focuses on "Following the Historical Footnotes of CHamoru Women's Embodied Land Work" as detailed in her introduction, which seeks to foreground women's voices, experiences, and mobilities. The bibliography contains a manuscript collections list of archives across seven states, Washington DC and Guåhan; oral history collections; oral history interviews of twelve CHamoru people; government documents and reports; films, videos, and CDs, along with primary and secondary sources. The vastness of her bibliography corresponds with the density of precious references and perspectives in this work, and DeLisle has left students and researchers with a road map for further exploration.

Inside the outer husk of the text is the niyok itself – the first two chapters are one half of a brown coconut shell with white meat, and the last two chapters are the other coconut half. Chapters one and four are primarily focused on the experiences of CHamoru women and provide a decolonial framework for how all narratives in the book should be viewed. White women, primarily Navy wives, are the literal center of the book in the middle chapters two and three. Viewing the book in this way is a reminder of racial slurs against black, Indigenous and people of color (BIPOC) through terms such as "oreo" or "coconut" where a person is denigrated for being BIPOC on the outside and white on the inside, the most disapproving accusation of a person that one could give that questions their roots and identity. *Placental Politics* discusses these issues around colorism and how CHamoru people from privileged and elite families living in the Hagåtña, which had been the cosmopolitan center

since the Spanish colonial period, had mirrored whiteness and claimed space in U.S. centers of power.

An alternate view of the book's structure can be seen in the way the first three chapters are filled with short vignettes of CHamoru women and CHamoru women's voices, a reminder of the way that textual material can be scarce in the field of women's history and collectively insightful when brought together. The desire to know more about the CHamoru women of early twentieth-century Guåhan is well-met in the "New CHamoru Womanhood" of the fourth chapter as *Placental Politics* crescendos into a kind of glorious richness on the life of Agueda Johnston. Johnston was a prominent educator and well-known figure in Guåhan's history, and this book helps readers to know her better. I am reminded of Cecilia C. Bamba in Laura Souder's *Daughters of the Island*, published thirty-four years before *Placental Politics*. Both Johnston and Bamba's voices and experiences are captured extensively by the authors: DeLisle's analysis of the unpublished manuscript that Johnston referred to as her "Chamorrita Notes" and Souder's interviews with Bamba. Numerous recent books, journal articles, dissertations, theses, and creative projects by Indigenous CHamoru women scholars, writers, and artists have captured this New CHamoru Womanhood[1]. Delisle writes:

> In tracing the historical development of CHamoru women's embodied land work and what I call an Indigenous feminist "placental politics"—women enacting and employing ancient knowledge and sacred practices, like the burying of the ga'chong i patgon—I am specifically marking the idea of distinctly Native and gendered forms of being modern. Thus, my work challenges assimilationist assumptions about Native women as simply rooted and static, and racialist discourses of modernity and indigeneity as mutually exclusive categories. (6)

[1] Some recent works include Sharleen Santos-Bamba and Anne Hattori's "The Mother's Tongue: Language, Women, and the Chamorros of Guam," Kisha Borja-Quichocho-Calvo's *Returning to Fo'na, Returning Home: Rematriating Education for CHamorus in Guåhan*, and Kiana Brown's "Where My People At?": Reclamations of Belonging in Three Black + CHamoru Narratives."

In the note at the end of this passage above, she discusses how "CHamoru resistance to Spanish liberal reform at the end of the nineteenth century provides a glimpse into an even earlier episode of CHamoru political modernization before American rule." The present, past, and future of CHamoru modernity with its Indigenous embodiment of time and space are invoked in this book, especially in terms of how the U.S. exacerbated and deepened the colonial trauma under Spain and how CHamoru women have worked to improve conditions for the well-being of their family and community.

In the first chapter "I Checho' i Pattera: Gendering Inafa'maolek in a CHamoru Lay of the Land," DeLisle analyzes the ways in which the lives of the lay midwives became regulated when Governor Seaton Schroeder required certification and licensing in 1900, the year after the U.S. takeover. The chapter includes a heartbreaking and haunting photograph (Figure 1.1) of a group of lay pattera taken in 1902. A 1910 annual report of the Naval Surgeon General describes this older generation of women as "a most incompetent lot, age and ignorance being apparently the requirements," and in 1914, Elisabeth Leonhardt, the Chief Navy Nurse, described them as "dirty old women who were native Sairy [sic] Gamps" (40). Sairey Gamp is a drunken midwife in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, the Charles Dickens' novel written in the same picaresque style as Guåhan's beloved Juan Mala stories. The elder women wore long calico skirts[2] similar to what artist Jacques Arago captures in illustrations from his travels with Louis de Freycinet. Their solemn faces, some fearful and pained, are captured in the photograph as they have been corralled and seated on outdoor steps of a building. The trepidation on their faces contrasts greatly with the smiling face of the Tan Ana Rios Zamora on the book's front cover. Their mobility ensured that children were born at home and the burying of the placenta ensured the child's well-being for the rest of their life. Th 1902 photograph of lay pattera is juxtaposed above a 1917 photograph (Figure 1.2) of CHamoru nurses in the white modern American nursing uniform of its time and further reinforces how the older women's practices were seen as a departure point for the Americans in what must be eliminated. The new generation of "certified nurse-trained midwives" created a "third space" that was not occupied by the lay pattera

[2] Laura Thomspon describes the skirts as calico skirts in *Guam and Its People*, 1947.

before them or white nurses and doctors who trained them (39-40). In examining interviews of surviving pattera she conducted in the mid-to-late 1990s and multiple documents from archives, DeLisle discusses the ways that emerging midwives respected the older generation and the legacy of CHamoru amot and healing practices while becoming proficient in "tropical medicine" under the training of American nurses and doctors.

There is a legacy in the Pacific of white women researchers writing about Indigenous people – Margaret Mead in Samoa and Laura Thompson in Guåhan – and so it is a bit surreal to see a flipping of the colonial script by DeLisle, an Indigenous CHamoru woman, as she in turn writes about the lives of white American women. In the second chapter "White Woman, Small Matters: Susan Dyer's Tour-of-Duty Feminism in Guåhan," DeLisle more extensively writes about the life of Susan Dyer and other white women within what she coins as a "tour-of-duty feminism" during her husband George Dyer's term as Naval Governor from 1904-1905. Susan Dyer's life is familiar to modern CHamoru women, life partners, and other dependents today who raise their families in the U.S. military. When not accompanying her husband on imperialistic pursuits, "Susan wrote about the emotional and physical hardships of being separated, raising three young children alone, and living a modest lifestyle on his modest paycheck. But Susan also had some sense of what was in store for her and what was expected of her as a wife of a career officer" (84). Drawing on Susan Dyer's letters, media publications, and other archival research, DeLisle looks at the ways that CHamoru people operated in spaces with white people and observes the deepening of friendships between CHamoru and white women that began to be explored in the previous chapter.

Spanish colonization caused the elite CHamoru woman to be more assimilable with the newly arrived American colonial regime, and she writes about how elite CHamoru mestisu families in Hagåtña, known as the "Shoe Gang" and "native 400" (102), participated in and eventually took over in the coordinating of social and civic events. The elite CHamoru community looked to the Americans, as they had to the Spanish centers of power they usurped, and it was this gaze that they were trained to embody that perhaps endeared them to the new colonial regime. In return, the CHamoru elite received access to social spaces, participation in civic

matters, and even shopping trips on US Naval ships to various ports in Asia. A photograph that includes Ava Martinez, Pedro Duarte, Amelia Martinez, Maria Duarte, Magdalena Calvo, and Concepcion Calvo (Figure 2.3) highlights the elite CHamoru women's more-Victorian style of dress and shows how fashion can be a marker of difference in class identity, especially when seen alongside the calico skirts of the lay pattera in chapter one. James Perez Viernes' *Negotiating Manhood* discusses class differences in prewar Guåhan with terms such as "'gi Hagåtña'" (at/from Hagåtña) and 'gi sengsong' (at/from the village)" (125). The mobilities of pattera nurse-midwives and mixed-blood CHamoru women as they traversed in and out of Hagåtña relates to the "third space" DeLisle focuses on in this book.

What little we know of elite CHamoru society during the Spanish era can be imagined through the archival piecing together of the early American naval era. Writing in the 17th century to Father Johann Eberhard Nidhard, Queen Mariana of Austria's confessor, Father Diego Luis de San Vitores appealed for funding for Catholic mission in Guåhan, "Any woman, of any social position, if she heard a child was dying without baptism, would cry out for someone to act quickly" (Garcia 143). In her campaign to build a new hospital, Dyer expressed similar sentiments when raising money as seen in the "one-page circular titled 'The Cry of the Little People,' which Dyer distributed to friends in the United States, she discussed the overcrowded and unsanitary living conditions in Guåhan, a 'little spot of land, so lonely in the great waste of waters'" (107). In this second chapter, the reader meets the woman who the Susana Hospital is named after, just as this archipelago of islands are named after another woman in history. Dyer was a military wife, struggling with childcare and finances on her own while her husband was stationed far away, and eventually took her place by his side in the US Naval rule of the island, just as Mariana of Austria's own exercise of power directly related to her proximity to the men who ruled.

In the third chapter "Flagging the Desire to Photograph: Helen Paul's 'Eye/Land/People,'" DeLisle focuses intensely on navy wife Helen Paul's time in Guåhan and her legacy in creating the blueprint for the Guam flag and highlights alternate oral histories that point to Francisco Feja "Tun Kiko" as the original artist of the flag design itself. The older Susan Dyer,

living in Guåhan ten years before Paul's arrival, embodied a kind of social and domesticating presence in imperialistic projects alongside her Naval governor husband. Helen Paul held a degree in architecture from MIT, and like many military dependents, her career might have become thwarted with the required periodic uprooting and settling from military base to military base, despite having found ways to apply her skills and abilities. In her time in Guåhan, Paul designed stages, painted postcards, and stepped into roles alongside other navy wives in her charity and community work. With her college degree, she taught in the teacher-training program at the Normal School, and she mentored future education icons such as Agueda Johnston, Jose L. G. Rios, Simon A. Sanchez, and Maria A. Ulloa.

While the second chapter is grounded in the letters and correspondences between Dyer and her cousin Susie and Dyer and CHamoru women in Guåhan, this chapter is filled with analyses of Paul's photographs. DeLisle explores Paul's use of the picturesque and conducts an extensive visual analyses of selected photographs from the Helen Paul Collection 1917-1919 in the Micronesian Area Research Center archives, and notes the contradictions in how these "candid and spontaneous snapshots of nature and Native peoples that ostensibly captured in a seemingly transparent way a natural beauty or quaint feature of their subjects but which betrayed the disavowed workings of colonial rule and agitations against it" (117). Without this astute analysis, it would be easy to be overcome with nostalgia over these precious images of a time long ago, but the perspective from which they are taken have purposely left out the agitations and resistance of Indigenous CHamoru people at the time to the colonial U.S. presence.

After exploring the lives of white American women, DeLisle sits with Agueda Johnston in the fourth chapter "Giniha yan Pinilan Guåhan: Agueda Johnston and New CHamoru Womanhood." She examines the fullness of the new CHamoru womanhood introduced in the previous three chapters by focusing on the transition of "Tan Agueda" from student to teacher. This journey includes the professional development of pattera and nurse-midwives, the traversing of spaces of white women special laborers and spouses set forth by Susan Dyer, and the mentorship with her teacher Helen Paul. DeLisle explores her life's work and experiences

as godmothering where Tan Agueda was "an important interlocutor and intermediary, whose direction and giniha [the guiding, steering, and directing of] in modern education and other ostensibly American spheres would extend a longer story of CHamoru cultural survival through a new colonial order" (157). Her lifespan covers the time from this early U.S. colonial period into the further militarization and commercial development of Guåhan after the war. Tan Agueda's story enters into the latter half of the twentieth century when the novelty of American fashion and beauty have taken root, and more land has become cultivated by bulldozers into sites of militourism.

Through her unpublished memoirs called the "Chamorrita Notes," DeLisle lets Tan Agueda speak for herself, and the literature and writing part of me found so much delight, both snickering and in contemplation, at her encounters with a "poetry fad" in the community where "the 'poets' would poke fun at or ridicule people, at parties or gatherings. The poems would be typed or hand written and thrown into people's windows or doors. . . . Then I received one which was very personal. I thought then that perhaps this might be the time to put a stop to it" (182). While her marriage to the American marine William Gautier Johnston might have displeased the CHamoru community, there was no question that her job as an educator, her family's businesses, and the social status they enjoyed among the military elite gave Tan Agueda access and privilege that few enjoyed. In describing her mother's best friend Marian Johnston, Tan Agueda's daughter, in his novel *Mariquita – Revisited*, the late Chris Perez Howard writes, "Being the daughter of such prominent citizens created a few problems for Marian, but it also opened a few doors. She was the most socially minded of her friends, in part because of her parents' acceptance into the military's inner social circle" (14). These military ties would fray in the hiding of George Tweed which Tan Agueda had helped during the war, and though his story needs no further airtime than it already has had, DeLisle illustrates the tensions between them and what Tan Agueda and others had suffered at the hands of the Japanese military.

Mobilities is the core theme throughout all the women's experiences – whether the traveling pattera, the education of nurse-midwives, the arrival of special laborer navy wives from far-flung states, and the upward ascent of Tan Agueda – and to be born in Guåhan typically requires the

birthing parent to travel to a medical facility, and that the child becomes mobile as well in their return home. Changing birthing practices created a disconnection to land and ties to land continue to be threatened today. DeLisle concludes her book with an outer husk that points to the work of contemporary CHamoru women who challenge militarization and are at the forefront in community activism and organizing in groups like Fuetsan Famalao'an and Prutehi Litekyan, as well as in the legislature, public forums, and gatherings around sacred burial sites. DeLisle's *Placental Politics* is a reflection of what is available in the archives and oral histories when it comes to the lives of CHamoru women and the people they interacted with; her book is a destination for where following the footnotes of CHamoru women in history have taken us.

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