

# Oceanic Whispers, Stories She Never Told: CHRONICLES AT THE EDGE OF EMPIRE



Above, below, and right: Three scenes of Santiago de Cuba / courtesy of the author.

*“Nadie sabe lo que existe en la profundidad del mar.”* — Cuban-Lukumí proverb

By Alai Reyes-Santos, Associate Professor, Department of Ethnic Studies

**A**round ten years ago, I was visiting my mother in Puerto Rico. It seemed like my usual trip home until one day, on a short drive, she caught me completely off guard. She suddenly revealed “the truth about my birth” and how it led to a complete shift in the course of her life. She said that nobody else knew the real story. And I could not tell it yet. But that I should know because one day I would write a book about our family’s history. And, when that time came, I must tell the truth. I was dumbfounded. I could not understand what she was asking from me. A family history? How could I, the scholar, delve into our own family’s secrets?

Despite my incredulity, she continued sharing with me documents, rumors, gossip, memories shared across generations that she had never told, that she had never dared to confront fully herself. But she hoped I would. ... The researcher in the family must.



Now, after her passing, all those rumors have come to life in the most unexpected places. Over the past three years, I have been visiting port towns in the UK, Australia, Dominican Republic, Cuba, Hawai’i, Lima, and the U.S. mainland. It all began as an inquiry about Caribbean peoples, mostly Puerto Ricans, and their transit through port towns shaped by multiple imperial histories: Spanish, British, and U.S. I followed Eugenio Maria de Hostos in the Dominican Republic; Lola Rodríguez de Tio in Cuba; and Blase Camacho de Souza in Hawai’i. Soon I was lured by places where all sorts of Caribbean peoples converged with Chinese, Filipino, Portuguese migrants, and with one another.

As I grieve my mother, I see her stories as reverberations, iterations, legacies of transcolonial experiences shared across oceanic regional boundaries: the Atlantic,

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the Pacific, the Indian Oceans; the South China, the Caribbean, the Mediterranean Seas. These waters whisper everytime I encounter them on a different shore. Their constant movement carrying the memory of so many crossings—some we have documented, some we have forgotten. As it grazes my feet, the sea foam reminding me that there are secrets to dig around in, in those places where water meets land, in those port towns whose interracial, inter-ethnic, in-transit, not easily classifiable or contained populations undo myths of static racial, gender, national, and regional notions of belonging.

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I find the *campesinxs* who migrated to Hawai’i in 1899 at a time of hunger and scarcity in Puerto Rico, at a time of U.S. experimental policies to contain unrest, dissent, in the island, while finding new forms of creating cheap labor for monoculture; the plantation maintained alive after emancipation. I find Puerto Rican women advocating for the independence of colonies in the Caribbean. I find stories of women remaking themselves, escaping abusive or loveless marriages, hoping for something else for themselves, disappearing into a new place. And I wonder where queer people are because I know they are there hidden in plain sight, as we tend to be in the historical and literary archive.

A mix-genre collection that combines memoir, travel narratives, creative nonfiction, myth, research, and academic inquiry, “Oceanic Whispers, Stories She Never Told: Chronicles at the Edge of Empire,” is a journey into the stories she never told: into maritime memories of Caribbean travel, migration, relocations, displacements, inter-ethnic kinship, and gender bending symptomatic of European and U.S. imperial histories; into the family histories that explain my mother’s truncated desire to cross an ocean pregnant with her first child, to attempt to remake herself beyond what was expected from her.



At a time when climate change puts port towns, and especially islands, in danger of losing themselves and their communities, when we must prepare ourselves to witness significant population movements from port towns and islands, it seems timely to meditate on what the ocean tells us about movement, migration, what we refuse to see, who gets to leave or stay, and the kinds of cross-ethnic and cross-racial exchanges that must evolve to support changing sea landscapes and the people who inhabit them.

I write this after visiting Santo Domingo. I write this on my way to Santiago de Cuba seeing an orange, blue, Caribbean sunset ahead of me. I write this mindful that the port towns that received other Puerto Ricans more than a century ago, receive me now under very different circumstances.

While they arrived in passenger ships, I arrive by plane. While many of them traveled back and forth without facing strict border surveillance, I travel aware of all the limitations to movements between Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic, and Cuba imposed by border policies and the U.S. embargo on Cuba. While many traveled to be reunited with family members spread across multiple Caribbean islands, or as an answer to the U.S. government call for laborers for sugar cane plantations in the Greater Antilles, I travel as a scholar and under the vigilant eyes of the U.S. War on Drugs and Cold War policies. I write this mindful that these cities are not what they used to be and may not be what they are in a few years. I write this as an attempt to

honor the places and the stories that may lie under the sea in the near future.

A beautiful coastline appears in the horizon. I am here. ■

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