Fieldwork through Filmmaking: Listening to Narrative Medicine in “Tåhdong Marianas”

Andrew Gumataotao

Abstract In-person interactions were drastically altered in the unincorporated territory island of Guåhan (Guam) and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. This article seeks to investigate how lålai (CHamoru chant) and music making are resurgent forms of sound-based cultural practices that can be understood as “narrative medicine.” The latter has the potential to be a model for musical sensemaking, whereby Indigenous storytelling maintains connections among kin and heals from colonial trauma. Critically reflecting on a community grant film project entitled, “Tåhdong Marianas: Storytelling Across the Marianas,” I explore how a young group of Indigenous CHamorus use the medium of film to adapt to the situation of COVID-19 while calling into question conventional parameters of fieldwork. I analyze how the privileging of work done by and for Indigenous people actively foregrounds the sonic potential of narrative medicine by focusing on the sensory experiences of island peoples to music in ways that undo the epistemic violence of Indigenous knowledge erasure and extraction.

Introduction: Travel, trauma and well-being

While the COVID-19 pandemic greatly limited the mobilities of communities across the globe, I was compelled to become mobile for the foreseeable future even amid the initial instance when countries began to shut their borders, restricting travel. Due to the distance between the University from which I work and my geographic area of focus, I was vaccinated and boosted in different locations across the sites of my interwoven fieldwork – the first dose on 1 April, 2021, at the University of Guam field house, second dose on 26 April 2021 at an emergency medical tent facility outside Saipan’s main hospital, and lastly, after traveling halfway around the world to Göttingen, Germany, on 20 January 2022. In a quite literal sense, my vaccination card marks the various stages of my fieldwork travels and the intersecting locales of my research against the backdrop of an ever-evolving global crisis. The
events in this article take place at various sites that demonstrate Indigenous mobility as well as how my ethnographic fieldwork became rerouted and remapped as I wrestled with the constraints of the pandemic.

While Guåhan (Guam) and the greater Mariana Islands are my geographic areas of research, they are also an island archipelago which generations of my ancestors have called home for a millennia. Drawing from this issue’s theme, “Building New Knowledge through Music and Sound,” my experiences of conducting ethnographic fieldwork in the Mariana Islands during the time of COVID-19 in 2020 laid bare the drastically disparate power differentials among Indigenous communities and island nations in Micronesia. In this article, I explain my role in comanaging a humanities-funded film project entitled “Tåhdong Marianas: Storytelling Across the Marianas,” and how it worked to transcend colonial space by invoking a multidimensional way of being Indigenous and engaging Indigenous communities across the islands in the Marianas during the pandemic. I critically reflect on the simultaneous process of ethnographic fieldwork, filmmaking, and relationship-building. I develop a concept I call narrative medicine through two particular case studies, and demonstrate how it emerges and becomes sonically potent. Through a musicological analysis, I further offer possibilities of how widespread dissemination via film facilitates crucial acts of CHamoru and Refaluwasch refusal of and resistance to colonial geographies and narratives. Indigenous community well-being in Guåhan and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) has become critical amid the global COVID-19 pandemic, making the extent to which Indigenous islanders can implement protective measures in order to safeguard their people, lands and oceans grossly visible. The current moment in global history “triggers powerful memories of survival and resurgence among important values and practices, sacrifices and stories that have kept Indigenous communities together” (Smith 2021:447). What Linda Tuhiwai Smith (ibid.) directs us to are the edges of canonical histories, whereby stories of survival, death, and current states of trauma are left unaddressed.

Trauma remains an urgent issue critical to understanding stories of people’s determination of continued existence. Perspectives on trauma theory point to the conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud (Herman 1997:12). In the context of Indigenous peoples, I make connections between current lived experiences and historical trauma.
ma, which is defined “as a cumulative emotional and psychological wounding across generations, including the lifespan, which emanates from massive group trauma” (Braveheart et al. 2011). Denial, repression, and dissociation operate on a social and individual level. The CHamoru people have endured centuries of colonization under Spanish and Japanese occupation followed by United States imperialism. Today, Pacific islanders in the Mariana Islands are descendants of those who have survived multiple wars, beginning with European contact, WWII occupation and increased militarized occupation today. The CHamoru people, who are Indigenous to the Mariana Islands, and Refaluwasch people, whose ancestral roots and seafaring routes connect them to the outer Caroline Islands of Yap and Chuuk, have inherited a complex world entrenched in the memory of war and radiation-related vocal silences. Jessica Schwartz frames “how silence emerged as the paradigmatic Atomic Age sensibility and was instrumental in controlling bodies and information in both the United States and the Marshall Islands” (2021:23). While Marshallese islanders are the foremost recipients of nuclear fallout, CHamorus and Refaluwasch peoples are a part of the postwar military tapestry in this shared inaudibility in Micronesia. War experiences and subsequent land theft by the US military continue to significantly disenfranchise Indigenous Mariana islanders today. An immediate aftereffect of WWII was how US (post)colonial discourse leveraged the haunting experiences of the WWII Japanese occupation to produce atmospheres of silence amid eminent domain land appropriations by the return of US occupation. Indigenous victimization manifested as a form of generational social repression immediately after WWII fueled by a narrative of US saviorism. This article recognizes the need to interrogate how Indigenous peoples cope with, adapt, and overcome the ‘unspeakableness’ of traumatic memories. The intersectionality of historical trauma, coupled with serious issues within the Indigenous family system, continue to effect Pacific Islanders (Natividad 2022). Vickers and Moyer (2020) draw the connection between historical, ongoing colonialism and the loss of identity and support, fragmentation of the family system, loneliness, and psychological distress in Indigenous populations. Contextualizing this historical background along with the current lived experiences of islanders is crucial to understanding how the vignettes of participants that were gathered during a community film project amid the global pandemic
present a timely avenue to explore the sonic potential of music making in undoing the unspeakableness of collective trauma.

**Tåhdong Marianas**

I along with fellow core project members Samantha Barnett, Aaron Santos, and Lawrence Lizama gathered life narratives of musicians and practitioners across the Marianas archipelago with support from the island public, a non-profit culture-based media group in Guåhan called Dukduk Goose Inc., and funding from Humanities Guåhan and CNMI Humanities Councils. Through our group’s film project, I situate my fieldwork activities among a diverse range of responses to the pandemic where island community voices were amplified as part of a wider network of initiatives that provided material relief for those in need.

One finds the importance of the collective exchange of experiences at the core of Pacific musical practices; a distinct way of knowing imbricated in one’s environment and an “engagement in and with Oceania is material intimacy enveloped in motion” (West 2022:16). Yet, at a time when the conditions of intimacy are radically changed – the unseen exchange between bodies in breath is more likely than before to render us severely ill or even kill us – is important” (ibid.). Our group was challenged with continuing community grant project activities amid the fluctuating nature of the global crisis. We were constantly presented with ethical dilemmas, such as the possibility of carrying the virus over from where we were living in Guåhan to the CNMI, where COVID-19 cases were relatively absent and especially when no vaccine was available. Notwithstanding these very serious circumstances, our willingness to overcome such uncertainties resulted in a vital media resource which people can readily access for years to come, capturing a critical moment when community uplifting was sorely needed. Our project group took up the art of filmmaking and media oriented around music making to engage our island communities, amplifying their voices during the pandemic. This type of community engagement provided a rich reservoir of Indigenous presence and narrative medicine in response to the great absence and often mischaracterizations of island vulnerabilities in mainstream media during the height of COVID-19.
Our group created one year of community programming, such as two virtual concerts involving local musicians, and interviewed community members throughout the archipelago ranging from local historians, traditional jewelry-makers, weavers, international lawyers, CHamoru and Refaluwasch musicians, that culminated in a short film. During our group’s travels across the islands, we were able to listen to much-needed stories of hope and resilience amid the pandemic. Several participants who live in different islands across the archipelago performed for us, sharing their personal perspectives on a range of issues, such as language and cultural loss, through the lens of their life narratives which were often linked to colonialism and militarization. Public gatherings had been cancelled and tight restrictions put in place, therefore, the project was unable to observe and work with large groups. However, we were able to mobilize community voices across the Marianas archipelago by turning to film and media as a safe means to maintain social connectivity via our online programming.

The film contains several performances and artists, however, I focus on two specific interlocutors. Firstly, Gus Matagolai Kaipat, who sings an original song and was interviewed along with his sister, Cinta Matagolai Kaipat. While the Kaipat siblings are of both Refaluwasch and CHamoru descent, I place more emphasis on their Refaluwasch identity in order to amplify lesser known experiences. Secondly, Frances Sablan, who performs a lålai (chant). The term lålai intones how chanting can become a means of communing with ancestors in CHamoru culture. Cultural practices today utilize lålai to engage in knowledge recovery that transforms the function of collective memory, “giving voice to embodied memories by means of translating bodily perceptions into comprehensible narratives and enacting them to an audience” (ElHayawi 2020:202). Gus Kaipat’s performance of his original song allows us to consider how other musical situations might open up fresh opportunities to reexamine how Indigenous wisdom can be conceived as not fixated on only belonging to a very distant past, but also very much a process of integrating contemporary music industry models into current island lives.

I worked in concert with a community-based film project that spanned the main islands of the Marianas archipelago: the southern island of Guåhan, Lutua (Rota), Tinian, and Saipan, during fieldwork activities from November 2020 to August 2021. Throughout this time, musicians and community members were filmed in such a way that the resulting film would refuse to “center mu-
sic as an object of study but remains fixed on social actors and what they do” (Pilzer 2021:453). I provide concrete examples of fieldwork experiences that take into account the contemporary reality of colonial borders as it pertains specifically to the Marianas archipelago, making connections to how paying attention to musical production has the potential to alleviate trauma through virtual mediums amid the pandemic.

The sonic potential of narrative medicine

The Indigenous peoples of the Mariana islands experience, grapple with, and respond to everyday conditions within (post)colonial sensory regimes, that of US military occupation being most visibly and sonically present. The US military retains certain legal rights over the islands in the CNMI – including the adjacent sea and air space – and conducts weapons testing and training, such as live-fire exercises and chemical and munitions testing (Arriola 2020). Under Guåhan’s current colonial status as an unincorporated territory, geopolitical maneuvering by global superpowers places this island at the center of armed conflict in the Indo-Pacific region (Kuper 2022). The outdoor intercom system of these facilities sonically pierces beyond its fence into local villages on a regular basis throughout about one-third of the island, most of which was taken from CHamoru families for military operations, producing a militarized power projection in Guåhan that is consistently audible. This auditory emission is inescapable for the local populations living alongside the military bases and is further buttressed by robust missile defense systems which sink their teeth in and pollute the land, violently erasing the presence of Indigenous people’s orientation to land, sky, and ocean. I draw attention to this to provide a glimpse of what everyday militarization sounds like. Therese Arriola rightly brings to our attention that militarization is more than an arena of geopolitical strategies between two large nations, it is “embedded in much longer, more quotidian, story about living with/in the ‘environment’ of the military” (2020:12). Historical and ongoing militarized trauma exacerbated by the pandemic has the unfortunate potential to trigger a multitude of violent formations that can affect Indigenous bodies on both an individual and community level (Natividad 2022).
CHamoru scholars, such as Manuel Lujan Cruz (2022), have interrogated mechanisms that affect the means through which Indigenous peoples can express their attitudes and relationships to place. He writes, “Guåhan’s mediascape is exemplary of the conjoining influences of militarization, empire, and capital which CHamoru activists challenge through their mediated interventions” (ibid.:2). This article illustrates how music can sound out Indigenous ways of thinking, knowing, and being that counter communicative dimensions of colonialism. I point to a concept from socio-literary studies that affirms the healing potentials which narrative can effectively contextualize and address traumatic memories (Rose 2020), while focusing on Mariana islander temporalities that critically engage pasts and current inequalities within the larger nexus of “imperial and settler militarist violence in the Marianas” (ibid.:7). I adapt the concept of “narrative medicine” as having the potential to be re-sounded in ways that can restore health to the Indigenous sense of place in the world (in this case, the Mariana Islands) via the sonic. Narrative medicine is a key term that is sounded and embodied, indeed becoming crucial to understanding the indispensable role of music as storytelling in Pacific cultures. Narrative medicine can offer a profound insight into how generations cope and thrive, despite being recipients of (post)colonial trauma. I find it important here to consider Indigenous perspectives of time and kinship relations which occur across tightly knit generations. Unlike conceptions of narrativity as logocentric and medicine in terms of that which is predominantly object-oriented, I employ narrative medicine here as having the sonic qualities to reconfigure sensemaking via sound-based practices that become animate and communicably palpable from interpersonal engagement among social networks.

The pandemic had significantly altered conventional means of collective music making, thus, the physical body could not experience the copresence of encounters with sound-based performances. The situation allowed our group to explore alternative formats instead of in-person events, and I argue that music maintained its necessity via online platforms, film, and small-scale interactions that were essential in keeping communities connected and safe amid the pandemic. My analysis is informed by this transformation, but I also draw on previous ethnographic work that works through notions of authenticity, opting for the more generative means of engaging the recreation of musical practices in the Marianas (Gumataotao 2021) and how, in
the words of Saidiya Hartman, “works to critique the power and authority of the archive, unsettling the limits on what can be known, whose perspective matters and who is endowed with the gravity and authority of historical actor” (2019:6). Exemplarily, while “The famous German South Seas Expedition to Micronesia (1909–1910), had specifically excluded the Marianas because CHamoru culture was perceived as too acculturated to Spanish influences” (Spennemann 2004:4), the life narratives and songs of the participants in our film, entitled “Tåhdong Marianas: Storytelling Across the Marianas,” demonstrate how narrative medicine can be vital in rightfully regaining precolonial culture, at the same time, forging a future on a culture’s own terms, transcending colonial influence.

I work through the process of fieldwork through filmmaking and how our group managed to connect with musicians and island peoples safely in smaller settings in light of public performances, when group settings were impossible during COVID-19 lockdowns and social distancing measures. I analyze one participant’s performance of lâlai, a CHamoru use of the voice that most equates to chanting. This type of musical storytelling follows a global movement in Indigenous communities for increased acknowledgement of oral history and chants that carry the weight of legal evidence in cases such as land disputes. I use this example to analyze the sonic potential of narrative medicine in how it is revealed in that privileged moment of physical vibration emanating from an elder chanting in a particular timbre of voice, while foregrounding the value of intergenerational transmission. Healing practices in the Mariana Islands are most readily recognizable in terms of the material benefits of åmot (medicine) that requires intimate knowledge of the land and plants, a detailed understanding of best time to harvest the latter, and direct mentorship from elders. Lâlai not only foregrounds this dimension of healing, but also the sonic potential of how the voice offers testimony that restores people’s relationships to place.

The increasing advocacy for the recognition of Indigenous presence in various situations from public events and governmental ceremonies to academic conferences, land acknowledgements, and cultural protocols can be viewed as an important step in imagining spaces as Indigenous land rather than settler-colonial territories. This can be considered as a counter-knowledge practice, something being increasingly acknowledged in postcolonial societies around the world, signaling an epistemological shift (Abels
That is, while mainstream media structures operate and perpetuate relations of domination, the sonic potential sounded in narrative medicine, such as lålai, offers specific counter-hegemonic narrative lines that engage with Indigenous sound-worlds. I gained a critical sensitivity through the process of filmmaking of how performances work to mend the knowledge that has been cut off from Indigenous people's pasts. These repressed ideas, feelings, and memories not only surface into consciousness, but do the work of restoring connections between multiple layers of trauma, a type of sonic treatment that goes beyond musical enjoyment. Rendering such experiences and mediating them via sound is a focal point of narrative medicine as it offers a means of connectivity that eschews overly interpretive frames of words, olfactory, and other senses. Instead, it finds ontological significance in the ephemeral nature of sound and acknowledges the traces of loss while sounding out a path that heals from these absences. This also reaffirms a CHamoru concept called hasso, an amalgam of possible temporalities that does not necessarily distinguish between pasts, present, or future. Alternatively, this worldview provides a possibility to imagine and remember otherwise that can be accelerated, engaged further with music, performing arts, and other expressive means which reveal healing qualities via the sonic. I critically examine this project as a springboard for developing how fieldwork activities facilitate the way in which narrative medicine taps into a sonorous project of decolonial critique that aims to rethink music making practices in the Western Pacific island world. Narrative medicine “strengthens cultural memory endangered by colonialism, militarization and US territorialism” (Cruz-Banks 2021:222).

The people and music in the film, as well as our group’s experience traversing borders during the COVID-19 pandemic, were forms of narrative medicine that reached ultimate potency in the musical situation of each interview featured in the film. The process of attuning to sound radically altered by the pandemic, nevertheless, provided a salve to both generational trauma and the contemporary and current trauma created by the distancing necessary to curb the pandemic. While narrative medicine can be understood as a healing process amid colonial erasure, it can also be extended as a form of Indigenous refusal; the musical situations expounded upon here, such as lålai, generate kåna, a type of spiritual energy that facilitates the
shared feelings of ancestral connection, a sensorial experience that heals through the sonic.

**Fieldwork in times of COVID-19**

In November 2020, amid the community spread of COVID-19 in Guåhan, the island of Saipan, Guåhan's sister island in the north just thirty minutes away by plane, had not yet experienced the community spread of the virus, owing to proactive travel and quarantine measures by the commonwealth government set in place for anyone traveling to the CNMI. I make a distinction between Guåhan and the CNMI because it is important to note that due to multiple waves of colonial subjugation (Spain, Germany, Japan, USA), the Mariana Islands and its people have been displaced, relocated, and politically remapped as a result of various colonial administration's goals. The unincorporated territory of Guåhan and the CNMI are politically demarcated as separate governments with varying degrees of autonomy that originate from their colonial relationship with the US.

![Figure 1. Lawrence Lizama (L) and Andrew Gumataotao (R) prepare film equipment for an interview. Photo courtesy of author.](image-url)
Figure 2. Project members in the Island of Tinian. Left to right: Andrew Gumataotao, Aaron Santos, Samantha Barnett, and Lawrence Lizama

Guåhan’s immediate neighbors in Micronesia, such as the Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of Palau, and the Republic of the Marshall Islands, all had the ability to swiftly close their borders. Even for Guåhan’s sister islands in the CNMI, they were able to set tighter restrictions and quickly avail themselves of masks, COVID tests, medical equipment, and vaccines from other nations without explicit consent from the US Federal government. Moreover, because one-third of Guåhan’s land is used exclusively by the US military, the once regular influx of military personnel spiraled into a series of contentious issues when island residents urgently voiced concerns over how infected sailors aboard the USS Theodore Roosevelt were allowed to quarantine outside the military base (stolen Indigenous land) in the village of Tumon, a highly populated commercial and residential area of the island (Oberiano 2020). There is a long history of island residents serving in various branches of the US military, however, the unwavering US-American patriotism which the island so proudly touts turned into complete outrage when veterans were denied access to essential services, such as the commis-
sary on the base, the island’s prime grocery store (Toves 2020). Eight Guåhan community-based organizations – I Hagan Famalåo’an Guåhan, Manhoben Para Guåhan, Guåhan Coalition for Peace and Justice, GCC Eco Warriors, Independent Guåhan, Prutehi Litekyan, Micronesia Climate Change Alliance, and DukDuk Goose Inc./Nihi, asked, *inter alia*, why sailors were not housed in one of the island’s three military bases rather than among community members in order to exercise additional caution regarding the potential transmission of the virus (Escudero 2020:467). Guåhan’s political status further embeds oppressive disparities stemming from the island’s lack of governmental autonomy.

Our project served as a form of strategic resurgence of applied Indigenous values, practices, and stories that proved vital to the island’s survival and well-being. Issues such as the state of health and food security, domestic violence, and a lack of access to social services exacerbated during the pandemic continue today. While the islands are partitioned into two political entities that create disparities on both sides, mutual aid and solidarity have emerged and been sustained in times of hardship, keeping kinship relations strong, such as when the CNMI was hit by the record-breaking typhoon Yutu in 2018 (Arriola 2020). I situate various island realities within experiences of fieldwork across the islands of CNMI and Guåhan, moving forward with future fieldwork.

The majority of the music gathered consists of interviewees’ original compositions, following their influential careers as recording artists in the islands, with some exceptions, such as an interview in which one participant shares a chant of a particular knowledge (rice cultivation). Project participants including Frances Manibusan Sablan, John Joseph Concepcion, Roman Tudela, Gus Kaipat, Cinta Kaipat, Melchor Mendiola, and Melvin Won Pat Borja were among the artists who shared their stories of island life and performed for the Tåhdong Marianas project, geographically spanning the Marianas islands from Guåhan, Luta, Saipan, and the northern island of Pågan. Roman Tudela currently heads the Office of Indigenous Affairs in Saipan. In his interview, he performed a song he wrote for his son. Most islanders, after secondary education, relocate off-island to pursue higher education; the economic opportunities of permanently living abroad is a reality with which many families contend. Melchor Mendiola from the island of Luta is known in the community for creating the Rota anthem and recorded his own origi-
nal album in the 1980s, while Melvin Won Pat Borja has had a lasting impact on Guåhan's youth for establishing a spoken word program called I Sinangan-ta before becoming the current director of Guam Museum.

**Goals and expectations**

Our goal was to weave a narrative that brought together island voices across the Marianas, however, as we learned more about stories of place and our interpersonal relations became more comfortable, it became clear that perspectives surrounding Marianas identity were complex and resonated differently among each island locale for our participants. I, for instance, as an advocate for language revitalization, conducted interviews in the CHamoru language which presented profound yet lengthy interviews that needed to be transcribed and translated into English for a wider audience engagement, not to mention the moments of communicative challenges given that I learned my mother tongue as a second language. In terms of island-to-island relations within the archipelago, where you were raised played a factor, and it was quite challenging to weave multiple island perspectives across generations into one short film. Artists performed their original songs that further enriched (and challenged) how conventional representations of Pacific peoples and their music are primarily perceived. Rather than imagining Pacific Indigenous music solely in the context of rigid cultural practices, the short film eschewed a cultural script that depicted music as a disappearing cultural practice, nor was it safe to work with large dance groups. All our interviews were one-on-one and each was followed by a performance. Because this musical project’s total presence is online, it joins critical scholarly movements that foreground the importance of music's emerging presence in online social media platforms, especially in Pacific contexts (Dietrich 2016). I recognize their significance, situating the need for Pacific Indigenous peoples to articulate their sense of home on the everyday level of ordinary people as they share their experiences of ordinary life. Their songs and musical careers become part of a wider debate on culture that moves to rework perceptions beyond classic characterizations of Indigenous musical content as markers of difference, alterity, ‘natural,’ or possessing an essential truth. While not wholly rejecting these markers, it is important to understand to what end(s) natives deploy their culture and for what purposes. Na-
tive Hawaiian scholar Lani Teves (2021) warns of the dangers of re-embedding the belief that native selves have only ever really existed prior to colonization, a notion that is dangerously similar to the imperialist ideas of the noble savage. Focusing on musician participants in this project was a means for them to set the terms of engagement by foregoing the pressures of performing to outsiders’ expectations, institutional recognition, or using their performance as a measuring stick of culture. Instead, this project allowed them to share what they wanted to share, to sing what they wanted to sing.

The artists

![Film Premier Flyer](image)

**Figure 3.** Film Premier Flyer. Image courtesy of the author.
Figure 4. Gus Kaipat (L) performs a song alongside his sister Cinta Kaipat (R)

05:13
F-U-N by Gus Kaipat

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Refaluwasch</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leesor ngali lebwong</td>
<td>From morning to evening</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I ghal móótúl weti semey</td>
<td>I’d sit and wait for my father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bwe ebwe umwuuwei ló leeset</td>
<td>To take me fishing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mwuril nge ai ya ittilong laalaso</td>
<td>Then to visit the farm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A ira bwe lei ute súú sengi</td>
<td>Then he said, “My child don’t abandon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mille mwamwaayul faluwasch</td>
<td>this beautiful island of ours”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I angali bwe: I afaschii lol isla</td>
<td>I said: “I love life in the islands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E faar ghil F-U-N</td>
<td>It is f-u-n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ighilaal faluweey</td>
<td>There my home will always be</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nge I sobw lighiti</td>
<td>and I will never leave it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leesor ngali lebwong</td>
<td>From morning to evening</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I ghal móótúl weti ilei</td>
<td>I’d sit and wait for my mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bwe ebwe umwuuwei ló leeset</td>
<td>To take me fishing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mwuril nge ai ya ittilong laalaso</td>
<td>Then go to visit the farm</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Then he said, “My child don’t aban-
don this beautiful island of ours”
I said: “I love life in the islands
It is f-u-n
There my home will always be
and I will never leave it”

Gus Kaipat took out his ukulele in front of our cameras, audio equipment, and crew, and instantly began to make intricate arpeggio-like strumming patterns while he hummed the introduction to his song. Gus performed an original composition in Refaluwasch for us. It is a song for the youth in his family and community that is about island life and how we must continue to teach the youth to learn the Refaluwasch language and culture and take responsibility for the islands in which they live. His strumming, vocal timbre was razor-focused on melodic movement, while expressing his voice dynamically, leading to a soft vocal delivery when he utters “faluwasch” meaning “our land.” Augustine “Gus” Matagolai Kaipat and Cinta Matagolai Kaipat shared experiences of being born on the northern island of Agrigan and raised on the island of Pågan. The many tittilap (stories) Cinta and Gus have shared with me offer a complex narrative of their identity as both CHamoru – Indigenous to the Marianas and Refaluwasch – island peoples with ancestral ties to the outer islands of Yap and Chuuk. Their lived experiences provided a deeply nuanced understanding of the cultural landscape linked to seafaring practices still present today and forced migration as a result of natural disasters and colonial labor. Growing up predominantly in the Re-
faluwasch culture, they both helped to promote Refaluwasch (Carolinian) culture in Saipan. Cinta formed a dance group called the Carolinian Culture Club in high school and represented the Northern Marianas in performing arts at a young age. She explained in conversations about Refaluwasch culture that Re in Refaluwasch means “of” and faluw means “land,” when you add asch at the end it then becomes “our.” Cinta has interpreted this in terms of how her ancestors first sailed to Seipel (Saipan), over time when the island began to be reinhabited, when Refaluwasch would see the canoes coming
onto shore they would say, “Refaluwasch! Our people are coming in” – the people of our homeland – in the Caroline Islands.

Gus Kaipat has been a community advocate for Refaluwasch culture. He formed the band “Olomwaay” as a way to perpetuate and celebrate both CHamoru and Carolinian culture. It is important to mention how the band came to be named Olomwaay because it reveals the challenges of recognition of Refaluwasch culture even among Pacific Island communities. The explanation for the band’s name is as follows, Olomwaay is a Refaluwasch (Carolinian) word that means “Peace, God bless, and thank you.”

A long time ago, our great aunt Florencia Kaipat Seman, who was involved in creating the very first Carolinian dictionary, was asked if Carolinians had their own word for “thank you.” When she mentioned the word Olomwaay, she was laughed at, and it was rejected because it sounded like another less socially acceptable word. She was a bit hurt by that. When she told me that story, I vowed to promote the word as much as possible in her honor. So it was my only choice when it came time to name our band and company. (Gus Kaipat)

Our session with Gus and Cinta would soon facilitate a discursive intervention in our film in terms of how previously unheard voices were made resonant for wider audiences. Not only did Gus’s song captivate the group, it also revealed a number of conspicuous absences in light of their complex experience as Refaluwasch people. The act of listening to Gus’s song activated a specific mode of Indigenous agency that, via his voice and sound practice, gave way to an encounter that allowed us to participate in a tapestry of intersubjectivity that was previously silent; a narrative that only he could initiate. Together with Cinta and Gus’s stories, their music became increasingly relatable and provided important testimony that, in addition to serving as a medium of transmission, invited the group to develop a relation between sound, performer, and listener. These experiential qualities were rendered accessible for our in-person team and that further became dispersed via the digital vantage point of film.
Of rice and healing

Figure 5. Saina Frances Manibusan Sablan shares her stories with project members before she chants lålai fâ'i

Lâlai Fâ'i
Hafa guela, hafa u gupu, hafa ma omom una ma tutu,
Fâ'i, fâ'i, fâ'i, ma koko ma tutu ma tayim
Fâ'i, fâ'i, fâ'i, che'chu famalao'an yan lalahi
I sadduk pat i tanu’ nai ma tanum
Ma gu’um i punta ma ko’ko’ gi tulu na gualafon
Ma po’lu gi guafak, para u ma gaoha’
Manlâlai, manlâlai pues na ma bailayi
Tulu na famalao’an, ma fahom nai i fâ’i
Pues ma nangga na u mâsa ayu ta’lulu na ma bailayi
Mako’ko’ mako’ko’ nai i fâ’i , ma tutu ma tutu matutna i fâ’i
Ma tafyi ma tafyi matafyi nai i fâ’i

Frances Sablan has been a CHamoru Cultural Arts dancer for over 30 years. She heads the Guma ManAntigu group in Saipan, thus, her involvement over the years in CHamoru dance revitalization has been of profound importance in the Marianas community. She talked about her career as an educator in the public school system in her interview, and how she slowly
experienced and took part in the revitalization of the CHamoru language and culture. She chanted lålai få’i (rice chant) for us, a chant that was the result of in-depth discussions with her contemporaries at a meeting of the Pacific Islands Bilingual Bi-Cultural Association, as well as collaboration with community practitioners, such as Dolores “Ling” Marciano. Saina Frances tells us the following.

Esta gaige gi ochenta âños si Tan Tiha. Esta kalan maleffañaihon [...] Nangga fan ta’lo tan tiha kao siña un ripiti enao ya un na’dispasio, sa’ bula siha na palabra nuebu [...] Kada ha sangan, kumâti.

At that time Tan Tiha was already eighty years old. She was already forget-ful. (Saina Frances to Tan Tiha): “Please hold on Tan Tiha, can you repeat that? And please slow down because many of these words are new to me [...].” Each time she spoke, I cried. (Interview by Frances Manibusan Sablan with a cultural practitioner in November 2020)

In this discussion, a senior member, the late Tan Tiha (Aunt Tiha), from the island of Luta, shared her knowledge by teaching lalai få’i to them, a chant she had learned from her grandma as a child. An important historical note is that while all CHamorus across the archipelago had been funneled down to Guåhan during Spanish colonial rule, the people from Luta had successfully resisted removal by seeking refuge in caves. Stories of rice terraces made by the chiefs of old can still be traced to specific place names on the island. The sonic event created by Saina Frances Manibusan in our sit-down entails a particular kind of environmental historicity when she shared lålai få’i with us. She recounted that when she first learned this lålai, the words were unintelligible to her. Because she could not understand what Tan Tiha was saying, she had to return to this elder several times and seek help from the latter’s daughter in order to gather the chant successfully. Få’i refers to rice that is found “out in the field,” and while this subtle distinction offers more specificity to what type of rice Frances Manibusan is chanting about, it alludes to how CHamorus have practiced growing and harvesting rice, a practice seldom found anywhere else in the Pacific. Lålai has been used as a practice of somatic restitution of oral history, creating a critical CHamoru ancestral worldview (Cruz-Banks 2021:214). Furthermore, Ojeya Cruz-Banks states that “Chanting is not just about the voice; it involves the whole body functioning as a resonating cavity of song” (ibid.). There are many names for the different stages connected with rice, such as pugas (uncooked harvested rice) and hineksa (cooked rice), which are the most common. It is still re-
membered that the use of rice has been a vital part of ceremony in Marianas CHamoru culture. It is linked to marriage practices, mourning rituals and Fu’una (sometimes Fo’na), the collective mother of the Taotao Tåno (people of the land). CHamorus also celebrated a yearly fiesta at Fuha rock, where Fu’una had created the CHamoru people. Rice would be presented as offerings and would then be kept later and taken back to people’s villages to cure the sick. Community emphasis has recently been placed on reclaiming this practice through the annual Lukao Fuha (pilgrimage to Fuha), where people make offerings of pugua (betelnut), pugas (uncooked rice), and chant to re-activate the healing potentials of this sacred site in southern Guåhan. During the post-World War II era, CHamoru and Refaluwasch lives were transformed in such a way that the islanders had to shift away from farming and hunting and participate in a cash-based economy. This, in turn, ushered in a “new systematic subtraction of those everyday moments of singing, speaking, and touch between parents, grandparents and their children, and between siblings” (Robinson 2020:56). Saina Frances’s account of gathering this knowledge from Tan Kitta reverses this deprivation of intergenerational kinship by retaining lived experiences with her and transmitting it to her dance group and, by extension, the island community.

Saina Frances’s explanation of how she had cried when uncovering this knowledge from Tan Tiha and subsequent discussions with contemporaries opens possibilities to perceive lålai as transcending its aesthetic function to carry the healing qualities of memory, more specifically, via the CHamoru concept of Hasso – a combination of imagination and remembering that, in this instance, is enacted in sound. It links itself to current resurgent rituals, such as lukao Fuha, where CHamoru ways of worshipping that were once outlawed by colonial administrations are being revitalized. Considering this, lålai can be placed as a decolonial strategy that works through oscillating layers of aural traces of history, echoes, whispers, and voices that become audible momentarily that “productively haunt our listening” (Robinson 2020:62). In our conversation with Saina Frances, she shared with us firsthand her experience when performing this chant in public.

Guaha na biahi yanggen in prisenta gi kumunidåt guaha i manâmko ilek-ña, “Månu ta’lo si Frances na rikohi este na tiningo?” Kalan manhinehengan, (laol) ya-hu sumangan i estoria-ña siha, månu yan hâyi na hu chuli este na infotma-sion [...]. Todu i tiempo hu prisenta hafa hu eyak yan hafa i mafanâgue’-ku.
Sometimes when we present (this chant) in the community, the elders often say, “Where again did Frances gather this knowledge?” They are taken aback, but I enjoy telling its story, where and from whom I got this information [...].

I always present what I have learned and what I was taught. (Interview with Frances Manibusan Sablan, 2020)

Saina Frances’s comments elucidate that if the work of narrative medicine is to mend the knowledge that has been cut off from Indigenous people’s pasts, it must do so in ways that also address repressed ideas from within Indigenous communities. While the remarks from elders suggest that lålai fā’i was subtly undermined, she, nevertheless, tells them the story of how she learned it, and even though they are surprised to learn this information, there is an opportunity for receptivity. The idea of infighting in spheres of cultural knowledge is not new, but the distinct way in which sound and modes of listening initiate knowledge recovery, such as lålai, places the sonic as the primary medium that assuages tensions and removes skepticism. Her resolve to continue to share and chant navigates contours of cultural loss that through her work, seals crevices of intergenerational trauma. More than a modest attempt to salvage culture or continue ossifying conceptions of a defunct Indigenous past, Saina Frances’s recollection and performance of lålai fā’i critically expands and retraces CHamoru cultural practices in under-acknowledged island places such as Luta. Her response to elders and community members dislodges itself from hegemonic normativities that perhaps a generation before her had no choice but to accept. Lålai fā’i chants new opportunities for healing.

Conclusion

Although the in-person premiere of “Tåhdong Marianas: Storytelling Across the Marianas” was cancelled due to the resurgence of COVID cases, it was widely received in the digital premiere. Co-project director Samantha Barnett and I followed the premiere with a panel discussion. Among the feedback submitted, we received one of note from an anonymous person who commented,

I noticed that the songs were first translated to English in the subtitles, then Chamorro in the subtitles, then subtitles were not provided at all. Was this intentional? If so, it was a very good way to tempt me to explore the
Chamorro language so I could understand what they were singing about in the last few songs.¹

To answer the anonymous feedback, no, it was not intentional, however, I do agree that this inadvertent fading of texts throughout the film found purpose. Now that the film has been released, this as an indication that new perspectives will constantly be formulated. Filmmaking and music making throw open opportunities to make powerful communicative modes that reside in the sonic both seen and heard. It allows one to be reoriented toward the outpouring of Indigenous voice and sound, restoring epistemic registers and listening qualities. Yet, it is naive to assume that what I have proposed in these examples and film inherently exhibit narrative medicine in and of itself, and are activated by all who have listened to and viewed the musical content and voices in our project. Instead, narrative medicine furnishes us with the potential to listen for, sound out, work, and rework music, lável, and sensory experiences in ways that profoundly engage the temporality of Indigenous islanders in the Marianas, especially during the pandemic that from what I have demonstrated, provided a mechanism for healing in the sonic experience of those we interviewed. It also does the work of creating ways for Indigenous peoples to wield their sound cultures so as to move voice channels of healing from internalized colonial epistemological violence. It can reveal the ways in which specific forms of music can bring about an obligation to “know what one hears.” Narrative medicine is not what Dylan Robinson describes as “a steady diet of damage-centered narratives, stories of trauma, media and how the resultant accounts of healing and transformation make-up for some sort of ‘Indigenous lack'” (2020:50). As these two case studies show the musically divergent approaches, narrative medicine is not concerned with that which is recognizably Indigenous, because these are but symptomatic palatable cultural expressions designed to perpetuate exotic fixations of Indigenous music as unconventionally outside the supposed musical norm. The aesthetic beauty of Indigenous songs loses its medicinal quality if the songs are taken, sounded, or listened to outside the context of Indigenous people’s lives, and, in turn, loses its onto-epistemological value. The songs’ healing potential lies in how one shapes their bodies and voices to sound. This experiential overflow allows performers and listeners alike to attune themselves to healing potentialities. This is linked with the prioritization of health and well-being among Indigenous communities, in that
they bring together multiple approaches of musical dialogue by and for their communities. This is where filmmaking works in collaborative ways to advance how one understands music in relation to the lives and stories of the Indigenous islanders of the Marianas, while also facilitating a protective way to mediate experiences between communities in the Mariana Islands and beyond.

Against the grain of dominant colonial narratives of island places, our project provided us with the opportunity to reestablish intergenerational familial relations among extended kin as well as kinships to land and sea. By incorporating these valued relationships, these relations between group members played a crucial role in forming moral bonds, ethical relationships that proved to be important in addition to institutional affiliations. Through Indigenous-led frameworks of resurgence such as the Tåhdon Marianas film, project members do not merely receive knowledge, but instead initiate opportunities of co-creation with participants in weaving narrative strategies that can safeguard dialogue only meant for certain ears, while also weaving compelling storytelling for public discourse. Co-knowledge production is facilitated in a conducive way to shift the stigma of trauma away from being generally perceived as a sign of weakness to a space that allows vulnerabilities to be safely expressed. It heeds the call of Indigenous community members who actively recover Indigenous ways of dealing with trauma. Lisa Natividad writes that “Indigenous people’s experiences of historical trauma warrant the integration of culture-based interventions to facilitate healing from family violence” (2022). With these considerations, this type of research-creation, where both participants and project members allow ample space to define the means of engagement, can reconfigure narrative medicine to have the potential to emerge from performing arts groups and musicians across the Marianas. Instead of fixating on the Indigenous content conveyed in terms of generic models of musical convention, inclusion and representation, it seeks to engage Indigenous communities more deeply: more tåhdon (deep).
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Notes

1. Feedback was obtained through an anonymous feedback generator.

About the author

Andrew Gumataotao is a CHamoru from the village of Hagåtña in Guåhan (Guam) and a doctoral researcher for the Sound Knowledge. Alternative Epistemologies of Music in the Western Pacific Island World project. He is a former East-West Fellow and MA graduate student in ethnomusicology at the University of Hawai‘i at Manoa. Prior to graduate school, Andrew taught the CHamoru language, culture and music in the Guam Public School System. He has taught at Guam’s CHamoru Immersion School, Hu-rao Academy and received his undergraduate education at the University of Guam in music and CHamoru studies. He recently completed a community grant project funded by Humanities Guåhan and the Northern Marianas Humanities Council entitled “Tåhdong Marianas” where he, along with a group of young scholars, activists, filmmakers, and artists, have been collecting the stories of musicians and cultural practitioners across the Marianas archipelago.