Capitalist Decomposition of Holidays and Bodies in Craig Santos Perez's *Habitat Threshold*

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Holidays are societal opportunities for entertainment, community, and cultural education. People of all ages celebrate together, enjoy festivities, and engage with other families based on shared values or beliefs. While they are essential for building community, the modern interpretations of these traditions come with the steep costs of capitalist consumption, unethical labor, and environmental pollution across transpacific regions. Craig Santos Perez reflects this capitalism-versus-environmentalism discourse through his poetry collection, Habitat Threshold, with three poems focusing on holidays with long histories of paganism, consumer celebration, labor exploitation, and ecological suffering: Halloween, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. By exploring interconnected discourse within these poems and nurturing enlightenment and speculation, Perez encourages readers to ponder the profits of supremacist capitalism at the cost of environmental preservation, and to question whether they are willing to pay the price tag.

"Halloween in the Anthropocene (a necropastoral)" is one of the opening poems in the collection, describing the ecocentric greed of the holiday and the United States' extortion of the natural environment and unpaid/underpaid labor. The title foreshadows to the audience that the holiday's lore is more complex than commercial advertisement; true to its pagan origins, Halloween is a tradition manufactured in the Anthropocene (the human epoch) and connects the pursuit of spiritual knowledge or enlightenment to the dead. Having established the temporal and cultural contexts, Perez illustrates the foil "entities" of nature and pollution by identifying their similarities, beginning with the opening lines: "Darkness spills across the sky like an oil plume. /The moon reflects bleached coral" (12). Even the naivety of children—traditionally compared to symbols of innocence and youth—and mothers—to kindness, wisdom, and fertility—are subjected to this cruel truth:

Tonight,

> let us praise the souls of native youth, whose eyes
> are open-pit uranium mines, veins are poisoned
> rivers, hearts are tar sands tailings ponds. Tonight,
> let us praise our mothers of fallout, mothers of cancer
> clusters, mothers of slow violence, pray for us, because
> our costumes won't hide the true cost of our greed. (12)

Perez emphasizes the environmental exploitation that also tarnishes children and mothers' purity as trick-or-treaters demand more and more—not more that is necessarily good, but any kind of more that contributes to their annual greed. The consumers are as contaminated as nature, with all bodies suffering in the plight of humanity's world domination. Exploring the poetic power of contrasts such as Perez's writing, Dr. Rose Lucas from Victoria University, Australia argues that sound and silence in poetry—which can be found through Perez's choices of line breaks, correlations of bodies and pollution, and insistence on purification—fills the liminal space within and between words:

> By prising open binaries such as self and other, inside and outside, silence and word, breath and text, [...] poetic language is in fact a kind of deconstructive activity–challenging us to recognise the habitual persistence of binary and hierarchised understandings of self and world while also, by means of its techniques of destabilisation, suggesting broader ways of understanding self and the possibilities of dialogue. (Lucas 2)

Through this method of binary deconstruction, Perez provokes the reader to reinterpret themselves and the reality of Halloween. Prompted by capitalist greed, thrilled by flashing decorations, we become what we produce: toxins in the air and on the earth, choking nature and ourselves. Perez continues this wake-up call in "Thanksgiving in the Plantationocene," demanding attention to the reality of another holiday desecrated by colonialism and capitalism. Structured like the gratitude speeches found at modern Thanksgiving dinners, he addresses white classism, processed foods, and labor exploited from marginalized communities. This title, like the aforementioned poem, establishes irony in the correlation: while ceremonies of gratitude and religious blessings are prominent in many global cultures, Thanksgiving bears an ongoing history of violence, erasure, massacre, op-

pression, grief, and loss for Native American communities, with their lands, traditions, stories, and resources stolen, appropriated, and commercialized. The Plantationocene furthers the historical relevance by emphasizing the modern humanity's reign of the earth through slavery, conquest, genocide, and exploitation: the colonial plantations that enslaved, abused, and killed Africans, African Americans, Native Americans, and other disempowered groups in the global British colonies and the United States nation. Further, this includes ecological and environmental destruction found in animal abuse, pollution, deforestation, and other forms of violence to nature.

Perez expresses gratitude to these historically marginalized human and nonhuman communities while ridiculing the privileges of racism, classism, and environmental exploitation. He addresses the ignorance of wealthy, white native-born Americans enjoying their delectable foods at the expense of nature and communities of color:

> Thank you, instant mashed potatoes, your bland taste
> makes me feel like an average American. Thank you,
>
> incarcerated Americans, for filling the labor shortage
> and packing potatoes in Idaho. Thank you, canned cranberry
>
> sauce, for your gelatinous curves. Thank you, native tribe
> in Wisconsin, your lake is now polluted with phosphate
>
> discharge from nearby cranberry bogs. Thank you, crisp
> green beans, you are my excuse for eating dessert
>
> à la mode later. Thank you, indigenous migrant workers,
> for picking the beans in Mexico's farm belt, may your bodies
>
> survive the season. (37)

Similar in structure and style to how many families give thanks to relatives, friends, community, and religious faith, Perez pairs a food to its dark truth of labor and carries the reader through his blessings in couplets: physical pauses between verses fill these silences with horror. These pauses also represent geographic spaces used to replenish the dinner tables; labelled by Brain Wattchow as "places," they are physical entities with independent enti-

ties, not only influenced by our actions but also influencing our livelihoods. In his exploration of philosophy and human geography in poetic writing, Brian Wattchow from Monash University, Australia further elaborates on the mutual discourse:

> Places are never static; they are always emerging and be coming. Places are the product of the land itself, time, and the actions and desires of those who live on it, work it, dream about it, and change it. As a result, those people and communities are also changed by that place. The individual, the community, and the land, with all of its 'more-than-human' inhabitants exist in a dynamic phenomenon–this unfolding phenomenon is what creates a place. (Wattchow 17)

As illustrated in this excerpt of the poem, food and the environment play active roles in sustaining human families. Nature is alive and responds to the exploitation of its resources; once its soil and water run out of purity and nourishment, it will no longer provide crops and fresh water to the farmers and laborers. It responds to how humans treat it in an interactive, interconnected relationship. Therefore, as Wattchow described, nature is a place that changes by the hands' choices and is changed by the community it feeds.

The pattern recognition of these consumer-based holidays continues as Perez shifts to the next holiday, another with pagan origins and contemporary commercialization for capitalist gains: "Christmas in the Capitalocene / recycling Irving Berlin." Adopting the structure of a famous Christmas song, he wishes for a kind of winter holiday that all the marginalized families, children, and laborers are deprived of: warm, prosperous, fair, and safe. Similar to "Thanksgiving in the Plantationocene," Christmas is introduced in the poem's title as the present-day epoch of humanity, shifting from local plantations for slavery to outsourced underpaid labor for the consumer's affordable prices and instant gratification. The subtitle also establishes the structure; adopting Russian-born songwriter Irving Berlin's famous song, "White Christmas," Perez effectively "recycles" a lyrical shape to make his uncomfortable narrative rhythmically familiar: there is an ongoing, deepening conflict between environmental preservation and capitalist convenience.

Replacing the cheerful dreams of bells, snow, children, and comfort often enjoyed by privileged families, Perez illustrates the cold and dark reality

of corporate goals, synthetic materials, racial brutality, and global warming. He begins by addressing inauthentic decorations, deprived of love and jolly commonly associated with the holiday; instead, he calls it "a fake Christmas, / just like the plastic trees made in China, / where factories glisten and workers miss / their distant children and villages" (48). During the holiday season when consumers can enjoy a celebration with their families, Chinese laborers are separated from their parents, children, and relatives for the sake of earning an income. This fate is similar within the United States for corporate employees who create profits without personal gain, giving the upper class "a rich Christmas, / unlike the temp jobs we all know, / where forklifts hiss and scanner guns click / the aisles and shelves of online orders" (48). Capitalism forces underpaid workers away from their homes ironically at a time where families are encouraged to stay together, exchange gifts, and enjoy hearty meals. For Perez, celebrations are restricted to the wealthy. Shifting from capitalism and labor, he focuses next on police brutality that feeds trauma and tragedy to racially marginalized neighborhoods during a season that's supposed to promote family and community. Remembering friends from his youth, he dreams of "a black Christmas, / just like the boys we used to know," without the violence and injustice, when it no longer happens that "cops fire munitions and citizens petition / in the malls and streets of White America" (48). Just as black and brown communities are subjugated to violence year-round, the natural environment is also suffering from systemic abuse. After centuries of exploitation, deforestation, and pollution, the earth's ecosystem will manifest a winter holiday like Perez's vision: "a warm Christmas, / just like the ones we'll all soon know, / where floods have risen and cities riven / by extreme storms and tornadoes" (48). In every dream is an ideal fantasy for all, but the reality reveals a sinister society thriving on the oppression of families and nature. Craig Santos Perez's Habitat Threshold is a source of poetic education on ecology, consumerism, and personal values, leaving lingering questions in readers' minds about how their romanticized actions during Halloween, Thanksgiving, and Christmas shape the natural world. These three poems alone are stories of violence, extortion, and disembowelment of a person's integrity and nature's autonomy; further analysis of Habitat Threshold will reveal more narratives and truths about the consequences of Western capitalism. If we are prepared to reveal these answers, are we also prepared to sacrifice our luxuries for the earth's survival?

Works Cited

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