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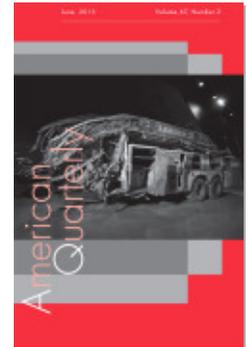
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## COFA Complex: A Conversation with Joakim “Jojo” Peter

*Paul Lyons and Ty P. Kāwika Tengan*

Joakim “Jojo” Peter is a doctoral student in the Special Education program at the College of Education at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa (UHM) and a community advocate at COFA CAN (Compact of Free Association Community Advocacy Network), MHAC (Micronesian Health Advisory Coalition), and WAO (We Are Oceania). He is from Chuuk in the Federated States of Micronesia and attended Xavier High School. He has two master’s degrees from UHM, in Pacific Islands studies and history, and he served as director of the College of Micronesia–FSM Chuuk Campus for fifteen years before returning to UHM to pursue his doctorate, which focuses on immigrant families of children with special needs in Hawai‘i. In 2011 Jojo and other community advocates founded COFA CAN, a community advocacy network that provides awareness and support for crucial legislative and legal initiatives that affects the lives of the Freely Associated States (FAS) citizens living in Hawai‘i and the United States. Jojo has lectured at UHM and Kapi‘olani Community College. In 2012 and 2014 Jojo worked with the Department of Ethnic Studies and the Center for Pacific Islands Studies to organize two symposia—“Micronesian Connections” and “Oceanic Connections”—that sought to bring together community members, educators, and students to develop strategies for empowerment and sharing among Oceanic peoples. Recently, the Micronesian groups have been conducting outreach to collect stories of health care issues and challenges among the COFA population in Hawai‘i. Paul Lyons and Ty Tengan interviewed Jojo Peter at the Department of Ethnic Studies, in the Ah Quon “AQ” McElrath Community Room, named after the longtime social worker, community advocate, and former member of the University of Hawai‘i Board of Regents who was born in 1921 to Chinese immigrant parents and passed away in 2008. It was a fitting space to be doing this interview, both for the dual meanings of “AQ” and for the ways that Jojo’s tireless advocacy for one of the most oppressed communities in Hawai‘i follows in the footsteps of the room’s namesake.

Paul Lyons: I thought it would be good to start with something about your own movements and the journey that you've been on.

Jojo Peter: Yeah. I grew up on my island, an atoll in Chuuk, but part of a group of atolls collectively called the Mortlocks, and one of those atolls is Ettal. It's a lagoon by itself. That's where I grew up, until the age of fifteen. I went away to attend high school in Chuuk lagoon, one of the main islands, we call it mountainous islands, in the lagoon. After freshman year, I got into a waterfall accident and broke my neck and became paralyzed. I spent the year after that here in Hawai'i. That's my introduction to Hawai'i as a young boy, basically living in the hospital—Tripler and the Rehab Hospital of the Pacific on Kuakini. One year later, I was taken back to Xavier, a Jesuit high school, boarding for boys and girls who are living with family. After I graduated I went to the University of Guam. Six years later I came to Hawai'i—in 1991. Stayed here for four years, five years, went back home after getting two master's in Pacific Islands studies and history and taught and worked at our college in Chuuk until 2011, when I returned. It was like a sabbatical, an extension of an educational leave to do a PhD in special education. As a person with disability you are aware of the social implications and social situations where disability is understood in very rich cultural context as being different and being aside from the “mainstream community,” whatever that may be. I have always been attracted to looking at social contexts in which people interact and looking at how people treat each other. My only intention was to get a PhD in special education, and then I realized that there were a lot of issues, particularly the community issues that I am now deeply involved in—as much as I can. So that's my story and my movements . . . just turned fifty. . . . It's been a really enlightening journey.

Ty Tengan: What was your position at the College of Micronesia?

Peter: It's College of Micronesia FSM Chuuk Campus. I got hired to be an education culture specialist. They wanted to give me the leeway to do culture studies projects. I taught history, I taught culture studies, communication, which was my undergraduate degree. We did a lot of work with sailing projects, oral history, to get the students to pay more attention to their own history and the means through which those histories are understood in a lot of experiential learning. In 2002, when the director of the college retired, I became the director of the campus.

Tengan: About how many students did you have at that campus?

Peter: Anywhere between eight hundred to nine hundred at the campus. Seven hundred is a good enrollment. On the average, given our limitation with facilities and instructors, and there is a big need for education at home. If you can get postsecondary education at home, why should you leave home? It's good to learn skills while you're at home. Our campus is part of a six-campus system throughout FSM, so it's a pretty big arrangement when you have six campuses in a four-state nation. The overall enrollment is somewhere between two to three thousand.

Lyons: About the term *Micronesia*. We were reading Emelihter Kihleng's "The Micronesian Question" in class. *Micronesia* seems to be different in its implications depending on where one is located, and I wanted to ask whether you feel that the term is useful.

Peter: It is a pretty useful term, actually. If you look at the recent colonial history under the United States after World War II, our leaders then, who were very young at the time, were out at the forefront of local governance. And of course the United States didn't want to deal with strong elements of local governance. To them it was a territory, and they had a commissioner to administer that territory with the basic social programs. So in order to foster some kind of credible, meaningful mechanism for strong local unity, our leaders saw the need to have a unified front. They were trying to push for an independent Micronesia where they would hold together all of that area from the Marshall Islands to Palau and up north to the Marianas, not counting Guam because since 1898 Guam had been a territory of the United States. So what was then Trust Territory of the Pacific under the UN trust nation program. You could look at it from outside and say, OK, there's a unit and that unit needs to grow on its own because one of the requirements of the trusteeship arrangement is future political status, meaning independence. And you could not be independent if you were factionalized. We understood it then and we continue to understand that we have incredible diversity in our culture, and we don't want that to be lost on our young people or on anybody. The strategy then was apparent in the writing of the 1975 Constitutional Convention, where you have all of these groups trying to negotiate some kind of meaningful entity that could give birth to an independent Micronesia. And people have talked about that, like "yes, there is that diversity," and we don't want to undermine the fact that there are many languages and many different cultural backgrounds, of course. And there is the idea that regionalism is a foreign concept for Micronesia, Polynesia, and Melanesia, but at the same time, it's

also a useful tool when you need it to be useful. You don't want to undermine the diversity that's a useful core value to have. You certainly don't want to lose all your languages, and those are very important concepts to us. And I know a lot of people have said, "Well you're Micronesian," and it depends on how it is used. Like over here, when people use that term in a problematic way, it undermines the rich diversity and communicates very negative connotations. It's packaged problematically when you use it that way, but if you asked our leaders back then, the people who were architects of the early self-determination movements, they really thought and continue to think that there is and there can be a meaningful Micronesian identity, just like "Melanesians." Of course there's incredible diversity in Melanesia, but at the same time they've come up with groups called "Melanesian Spearhead," and they have forged that to use for something that is totally meaningful to them. So, yes, I like that idea that we should use that term, as long as we don't use it to bash people over the head. It's not our term, like with religion, but we have managed to use both concepts in ways that are very meaningful and helpful for ourselves. So I don't think it's an "either or thing." I'm a Micronesian. I like people to know that I am Micronesian. I am also Chuukese, and more importantly to me when I am sitting among my people, I am from the clan of Masalo. And these are important concepts—and while I am with my community I also want them to know that I am a devout member of our Catholic group here because I know there is a lot of value that holds that together. So in the layers of multiple identity, that is one of them. That is part of it. And I like people to say, "We're Polynesians." "We're Pacific Islanders." "We're Oceanians," and those are the layers and we have to use them in very respectful ways.

Tengan: As you're talking about the independence movement and the element of those notions of self-determination, lay out for people unfamiliar with the compacts of free association what they entail, particularly what these compacts are, obligations of the US government. Maybe perhaps underlining also those aspects that are particularly important for thinking about issues that Micronesians in Hawai'i face.

Peter: Before I tackle that . . . we talk about "Micronesians." Here, it's another term that has just been born. All of a sudden there is an identity called COFA and it's pretty confusing, but at the same time you need to know what it is for all of those loaded things that underlie it.<sup>1</sup> Basically, the islands were a territory of the United States after World War II, and the United States realized during World War II that it needed to have a major presence in that region because of its

proximity to Asia. But also at the same time, its remoteness from the American homeland, although Guam is “homeland,” but still a lot of Americans don’t know Guam exists. So, those . . . opposite reasons are why the region was very attractive to American planners. For military purposes, it’s always been that. And if you look at the region between Hawai’i and the Philippines and Japan, this region of Northern Pacific is what we are talking about. By controlling this area, the United States has exclusive control over the Northern Pacific. And at the time, they were using the Marshall Islands to test their nuclear devices and weapons. And there’s also some clandestine operation going on in Saipan, training of CIA. And just to have those anywhere, all of that region tied up, like an “out of sight” part of a prominent history of Cold War America. They would show pictures of atomic testing or announce it on the radio, but for the most part it was out of mind. People know more about the term *bikini* as a piece of clothing than the fact that it is the actual name of the island that is still radioactive. People still cannot go back to their homes, along with two other islands in the Marshall Islands. But at the same time, the United States was charged with its responsibility under this thing that they helped create, the United Nations. So every other UN trusteeship administrator was doing their part in helping their own territories become independent except the United States. It was reluctant in letting the islands even discuss self-determination. They made it very clear—we want to annex the islands. The Department of War or what is now the Defense Department had no other reason besides just annexing the islands. But of course the Department of Defense didn’t know that they can’t really have colonies because President Kennedy said the United States is not a colonizer. So the agreement, the compromise, basically is what they worked out between the Micronesian nations, which by that time separated into three different nations. Their own internal politics, too, led to independent nations in Micronesia, Republic of Marshall Islands, Republic of Palau, and Federated States of Micronesia. Northern Marianas opted right off the bat in 1975, when they were trying to write a constitution, to have a closer relationship with the United States, and it’s now one of the two commonwealths of the United States. With the other three nations independent, the United States “officially” could not control independent nations. So they created this thing . . . it’s a treaty we call Compact of Free Association (COFA). And basically what COFA is, if you look at it, is making sure that the United States continues to have its military options in the islands while the islands can be independent. At the same time, they knew that all of their responsibilities under the trusteeship government—making sure that there is enough social

development, education, health, economic—those things were never fulfilled. They knew that and they continued to know that they didn't do a good job and the terms of the compact now will never be enough for the islands to be sufficiently independent financially. Education is still a major problem. Health is a major problem because of the way the diet of the people changed under the trusteeship government. Now those health issues are coming to the surface with the higher rate of diabetes, higher rates of heart disease. Higher rates of every other noncommunicable disease that you can think of, the islanders have it. The islanders negotiated an open immigration policy with the United States and the United States understood that there had to be a safety valve. Let's look at health. The health system back home can never handle the kind of problems we have. So people are moving, looking for ways to, not just get their members the medical services that they need, but also get them proper education. And what has happened is the federal government, in its ultimate wisdom, decided that they were going to reform the welfare programs and then somehow managed to consider us illegal immigrants. So now the citizens are not eligible for any kind of social services funded under the Medicaid program, basically. That includes health and other programs funded through Medicaid. . . . The reality is that it's not that easy to unlock and undo the compacts. We're finding that out the hard way because you look at the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) which reformed the Medicaid, the welfare. It's such a simple thing. I mean, we think it should be simple, because, first of all, we're legally present here. But the law doesn't recognize that. So we're trying to get that reversed. Leaders like to talk about what they're going to do about the COFA citizens, like send them home, but one thing that is just lost on people is that COFA citizens enter the country under open immigration. For example, look at my family. There are seven people in my house. Two of them don't work. Five of us work, and we pay taxes. We pay all of the federal taxes. We use the electricity, so we pay for all of that. We go for groceries so we pay sales tax. We use lot of things so we pay all of the taxes. But, even though we are paying for social security and we are paying for federal tax, our citizens are not eligible for Medicaid. So when these people talk about like, "oh, these Micronesians are draining the system." They are not saying, "We are actually not subsidizing other people's welfare, but our own." We are paying for other people's eligibility because we don't have eligibility. And the irony is that this is exactly what the compact was supposed to do: have an open enrollment so people can come here. And the term they use is *habitual residency*, meaning you come in, you establish residency right

away. Well, they're not even *qualified* residents the way the law is written. So there's a lot of, not just ambiguity, but disconnects. Our young people serve in the military, and they [military recruiters] actively go there and recruit our young people. But at the same time, the aunts and uncles and mothers and grandmothers and fathers and grandfathers of the same people serving in the military cannot even use Medicaid. They serve this country. See, that's not how it's supposed to be. Not to mention the fact that, through the Compact of Free Association, the United States basically has sovereign control over our lands, our water, and our sea. Whenever the United States needs to use any area for military and defense purposes, they will. The compact allows that. We agreed to that. We agreed to it because we see this as an equal partnership. We had no choice. What else did we see? We understood it to be a relationship with the United States, but as it is right now, it's so lopsided against us because we've guaranteed, beyond the financial assistance, the United States access to our land, water, and air. Our sovereign control over our place. And we can't even get Medicaid, which we paid for, and yet these leaders go off in the media like we are the source of everything that is wrong with this economy.

Lyons: I've heard that the community that's built around the hospital has a lot of group support—different houses for different islands. Epeli Hau'ofa talks about people doing things that are unofficial or that go under the radar of the official. Could you talk about what kinds of support systems Micronesians have set up for each other?

Peter: We totally rely on the strength of our communities and our families, and when people talk about communities, the easiest thing to identify is the church, but you don't see the other family connections. And the best example of this is funerals. Funerals here are very expensive, and many of our people do not have life insurance. So we have to pay for the funeral cost and actually take the body back. As soon as we know there is a death in our family or one of the families that we're identified with, we have to go to them. I think Fran Hezel says it correctly that Micronesians may not have bank accounts because we don't invest in individual wealth.<sup>2</sup> Yeah, some do. But what we invest in is people relationships. Because none of us by ourselves can ever cope and deal with living here in Hawai'i. I know funerals recently, where we have to raise \$15,000 in a matter of days. \$15,000. And we did that by letting all of our relatives, throughout the mainland, here, and Guam, know that there is a death in the family and everybody has to help out. Twenty dollars. Ten dollars. We have groups come over every night for novena, contributing something.

We had more than we needed. So those are the things that operate under the radar. There are very racist things that I've heard like "Oh, the Micronesians drive around in new cars." They are seeing that it's an expensive car. They see that as a welfare thing. You don't understand that a lot of people in the family depend on this one car to get people to work. People here drive themselves and their family to work. Our cars drive a lot of people. And when there's a need for our relatives to use the car, it's understood that it has to be like that. I'm not saying that we're all always successful at it. Some peoples' cars get repossessed because it's not an easy thing to keep up this payment. But a lot of those things, yes they do operate under the radar. A lot of these people what they see is this government-driven narrative, that, unfortunately comes from our leaders. They want to paint this picture that there is a thing here that has to be resolved. Honestly, I think that if there was no compact impact clause written into that Compact of Free Association, this probably would be another discussion. But you look at it this way, the nation of the United States enters into an agreement with this nation of ours that they will have open enrolled immigration and people will come over and work. But it also has a clause that says should any jurisdiction in the United States be impacted by this compact agreement, that jurisdiction will be reimbursed by the federal government. So the fight is between the federal government and the state government. But who gets stuck with negative stories? It's not the federal government or the state government. It's the people you're arguing over. Because somehow we're just being labeled as this helpless people. Of course, it's hard for people here, but it's almost like it's our fault. How can it be our fault in participating in the same thing that they signed off on? And the way that the government is going about this is irresponsible to be quite honest. And our leaders . . . we're not just Micronesian people. We live here. We are their people too. They're our leaders. We respect them as our leaders, and we hope that they will be just as responsible for us as they are for everybody else.

Tengan: When you're talking about engaging the state and the leaders, one thing that's been really notable in the last couple of years has been the development of the COFA Community Action Network, or COFA CAN. Could you say a little bit about what COFA CAN is and also how it's not only linked to and linking activism here but also beyond to the continent and elsewhere?

Peter: COFA advocacy network is one of several advocacy groups that have been functioning here in the state of Hawai'i. There are other groups like Micronesian United, Micronesian Community Network, and most notably

for their success, MHAC, Micronesian Health Advisory Coalition. This group started when the state of Hawai'i wanted to cut off most of the benefits from the COFA citizens under its basic health Hawai'i program. A lot of this group rallied together and got the community and the larger Hawai'i community, trying to educate people. And then the case went to court, and the federal district court agreed with the Micronesians that the state of Hawai'i cannot single you out. But then the state of Hawai'i under Abercrombie decided to appeal the case. A lot of us got back together, and we decided to focus on just the legislative and the policy aspects because you can't really tackle a lot of things; you have to really focus your energy. So the COFA CAN focuses more on the legislative and policy advocacy.<sup>3</sup> We met with the congressional leadership, and they were very supportive. We've met with the legislature and the entire legislature of both houses, and they congruently passed the resolution asking the federal government to own up to its responsibility. We are trying to reestablish the eligibility for Medicaid because we understand health is everything. You cannot do other things if you are not healthy, so we also get the community to rally to understand what was going on because we knew the state was going to go back to the court. So we decided to refocus our energy on the 1996 PRWORA and trying to get the US Congress to amend that PRWORA to include COFA citizens or reinstate COFA citizens eligibility under the Medicaid program. So we went back to the congressional leaders, and we're really grateful that they were able to put in an amendment in the immigration act, although we're not immigrants. We're trying to look for other avenues to get the federal fix. We knew that the case was going to go back to court and that we might lose the case, which we did. The Ninth Circuit Court agreed with the state that if the federal government decided to discriminate against the COFA citizens, then it's okay to discriminate too in the state of Hawai'i. So we're in communication with our legal team for support, but at the same time we're trying to figure out how to sustain the advocacy toward that federal fix. So we reached out to our communities in the mainland to get them to talk to their congressional leaders. We realize, however, that our leaders really want to help, but at the same time they have the responsibilities to their own constituency where such an issue is not very popular. So what we've decided to do is also along with everything else. We do voter registration of Micronesians who are eligible US citizens to vote and support these initiatives. This is a midterm election, so we know it's a start, and next election we hope that more people will turn up. On the mainland they have older communities, so you have generations already. Different communities in Portland in

Oregon, Washington, Nevada, Arizona, California, even in Mississippi and Missouri, of all places. Arkansas, of course, with the Tyson chicken farm. We want them to get the support of their congressional delegations. We've been grateful to our congressional staff and their bosses for helping us reach some of these people. So that's the political advocacy level. The thing we need to understand is that there are many contributions Micronesians have made and continue to make in this community. Those tend to get lost in the political narratives and rhetoric that are very discriminatory, very hurtful and racist, because when it comes down from the top and it gets into the community it poisons the atmosphere. Our schools are a big concern. A lot of bullying targets Micronesians. If the teachers are racist themselves, it just compounds the issue with their students. And a lot of our students have been telling us stories where school officials have said some very racist things to them or have failed to promote a more inclusive atmosphere for learning where students can understand each other's culture and respect that. One of those things that baffles me is the anti-immigration attitude, and I think that Hawai'i is a very good example of where immigration has contributed so much to the community. And this multiethnic idea, from having a multiethnic, multicultural society and community, and the lessons that we learn that we need to respect each other's culture and community. If there is a place that can teach the rest of the country and the world, I think it's Hawai'i. We need to understand the negative impacts of colonialism and what that entails when colonialism festers itself in the multiple layers of discourse and how we treat each other, how we talk about each other. Recognizing the value of not just the multiethnicities' realities but Indigenous cultures as well. I think we can do better. I like the idea that *Hōkūle'a* [voyaging canoe] is traveling around the world and carrying its message of peace and promoting navigation as a unique handle on knowledge. That idea has to resonate with everyone at many, many different levels. We need to celebrate those and the fact that we're able to promote, resurrect, and continue to live this experience.

Tengan: Recently in Hawai'i we've seen a lot of bullying of Micronesians in the schools, and community organizations and scholars are addressing this. There has been particular concern about Kanaka Maoli and Micronesian relationships. In your own thinking and practice, how can we make better connections among our Indigenous groups in the Pacific, as well as those on the continent, and especially with education in mind, and educational spaces and sites?

Peter: This is one of those things that worry Micronesian educational planners. It's always this question of what you're educating yourself for. Education

for what? I think we need to look at our world. Let's talk about identity and learning. In high school we always had this exercise where we tried to define ourselves: who we are and what is it that what we wanted to be and what was happening outside our own spheres, our own immediate experience. So we start out by defining ourselves first and our immediate person, then move to our families, then to our community, and then somehow trying to connect those to who you are. And I think if you were to do the same exercise now with the kid from Chuuk here, it looks very different from what it did back in the early eighties in our high school. Their experience here may have some areas that are far more problematic than we had when we were growing up. Back then we asked, how do we relate to that world outside us, out there? Now, if you ask a Chuukese guy what he is having issues with, you probably will realize that some of his disconnect is really not with here, because now he is relocated here, he is grown up here. It's really this disconnect in Micronesia. So I've always asked when I go and talk with them, "How much do you really know about your identity? How much is your language part of your identity? How much is your clan . . . ? How much do you know about Micronesia, your place back home? They have a very difficult time with that. I don't know what the next generation will be like, to be quite honest with you. We may have a next generation that may be problematic in terms of their relationship with people back in Micronesia. Some of them were like, "Well, I don't really speak the language." And I thought it was just kind of an act. And then I realized that even if they know the basic readings, you carry on conversation in Chuukese, and they're lost. I've never experienced that before. Usually the people that have those kinds of superficial language skills were the Peace Corp volunteers who come and try to learn our language. We've never experienced that somebody from our place or Chuukese would have that language problem with speaking Chuukese. Now we have Chuukese people here who have no skills in our language, then we ask ourselves, "Is that a problem?" So when we talk about education planning for the kids, what is it that you want these kids to know? You want them to have skills. You want them to have a future. Now is that somewhat disconnected from the identity of who they are? Or how do you define their identity? How do you define the identity of somebody born in Chuuk who came here when he was ten years old because his family had to move here? What's his recollection of home like? How much does he really understand? So we talk about all of this Micronesian stuff, empowerment things. And I know maybe because they're young people. But I think even just their understanding of that history, what their relationship was like, it's lost on them. So what's the implication of planning for education? And at the

same time, for example, when we look at Native Hawaiians, how much do they really understand. . . . it's a struggle now because there was a period when they weren't allowed to speak their language. So, move forward now, you have people who are trying to learn their language, coming to school and learning their language and trying to explore their identity and their history. So as a Micronesian and educator, I'm looking at my people and am wondering, what kind of education planning do we do for our citizens, our people born or raised here in Hawai'i. But at the same time, because I've always asked them this: what is it that you will contribute? About what in your background can you say, "Here's my contribution to this community, here's my culture, here's my philosophy and values as a Micronesian, as a Chuukese." Some of our leaders in the community are pushing for having some kind of Micronesian immersion school. So some of us have come together over the past year and started asking, "How do we plant that to happen within the context of their learning here?" How would it start? Would it start with after-school programs and eventually grow? We're communicating with people from Kamehameha Schools and trying to look at their curriculum. So there's this cohort in Ed. Foundation that just started this year, and we're asking a group in that cohort—two of them are Micronesians—to start looking at that as their PhD project. Look at what the planning entails. What are the models out there? Because it would be pretty crappy if going down the road we have a lot of Chuukese people who don't speak Chuukese. I think it would be the worst thing. And language is a pretty powerful identity that's not just an identity. It's a major part of who you are and it helps you learn, it helps you think, it helps you conceptualize things. So there's a lot of value in learning your own language and how your language reflects reality from your own values. We're training people to go out and teach in the communities, schools, and one of the issues is racism and bullying and misunderstanding, often of Micronesians. So if we don't make that part of their training, either they will continue on the path of their own misconceptions and then face the reality when they get to the school, or they just won't deal with it. So I try to get the teacher training program to invite people from our community to talk to them and tell them about issues. I talk to a lot of teachers who are like, I don't understand this one kid. Clearly there's a lack of understanding of Micronesians. At the same time you see the numbers growing in our schools, and it's almost there's no proper planning. I saw an e-mail message two nights ago. The board of education is holding public hearing on ELL students and of course targeting the Micronesian and how they can learn what . . . the e-mail message says something like how we can properly respect

communities and values. But they put this out two days before their public hearing on Maui so I had to e-mail people on our list saying if you know anyone in Maui, send them to this. Back home we were always wary of being "Americanized" through education. Perhaps there was a lot of Americanization because of the way the school was set up. We don't see ourselves, our values, as being taught in the schools. A lot of it was transplanted curriculum from the American school system, which was not doing well in their own universities. We always look at education because we fear that if you spend a lot of your time in this system without spending a lot of your time with your own way of life, you'll grow up not knowing enough of what you're supposed to learn to survive back home. Now the worry is, shouldn't we also teach our students about their own background and their own history. I have a couple of people at KCC [Kapi'olani Community College] who wanted to do a project toward the Micronesian kids, and I ask them the most basic questions. OK, we now have kids who know and understand their identity through all of these racist things happening in the community. So you have a lot of kids here who are trying very hard to blend in.

Tengan: When I think about this question in particular, what emerged for me is one of these potentially hopeful examples, the Ka Holo Wa'a project that essentially started out of one of our gatherings, Micronesian Connections, when Bonnie Kahape'a, who was a trained navigator and worked with Mau Pialu, decided that after seeing the issues that were being discussed that she wanted to do something with the canoe that she is the navigator for and captain of, *Kānehūnāmoku*.<sup>4</sup> And we got to partner with her and get students, both Hawaiian and Micronesian students from the high schools and from the university. They come together on a canoe, and for some of the Micronesian as well as for some of the Hawaiian students who didn't know these skills, they're also relearning them but learning them together. There's this other engagement of what else is out there, these other worlds, and that's part of what the voyaging tradition is about and is also about not leaving, not severing that connection with home and instead strengthening it.

Peter: We don't have to lose ourselves in the process of learning, education. That was the worry of some of our elders. And if you look, for example at Mau, if you see the video *The Navigators*, he wishes to keep Sosario at home to learn navigation because many of the young people were going away to school and not learning navigation.<sup>5</sup> So we're here and we're trying to educate our kids in school. At the same time, I'm also thinking a project like that and there a canoe

project also going on. Canoe building. We're trying to get our kids from KPT [Kūhiō Park Terrace] to go up to the valley and talk to the canoe builders.<sup>6</sup> But you ask someone and they're like, "Oh no, I'm not interested." There's still this impressionable age where what has been cool is really not exactly that. And I think at this university, for example, people talk about our Oceania connection conference, and it's almost like wow, because it doesn't really happen all the time here. It's not a regular part of the regular learning that goes on. When we're talking about this idea of a Micronesian school, one of those things at the forefront of our thinking is we want to educate our kids to know something about themselves. So when they do, it's not just a convenient project. It's not just one of those term papers or essays, but it's something that you really learn and be part of your growth as a person. And I think like you and I and many others rely on their upbringing to inform them about a lot of their heritage so I'd like for young people to at least have that broader connection and that includes their cultural knowledge and language and their traditional values. There's nothing wrong with their traditional values.

Lyons: One more thought. In terms of communities in Hawai'i and elsewhere understanding something more about Micronesian issues, it seems that spoken-word poetry and the arts have been able to do a lot that academic studies haven't. What do you think about that form?

Peter: I don't think that form is unique to Micronesians and the islanders, but yes, it is a form of expression that islanders have mastered. It's a far more powerful tool in some realms and has a much larger audience than the one for academics. People understand the power of spoken word and understanding emotions, the powerful emotions, and oral performances. I've tried reading poems. I don't get as much from reading it as actually hearing it, and I hear somebody because I'm listening to a voice. It's hard to imagine emotions, maybe just because of my training from written text without the performance. Even when we read it to ourselves, we hear our voice and think it's good. So I've heard some very powerful performances from local poets. Poets like Kathy, Emelihter—especially the YouTube pieces by Kathy.<sup>7</sup> She just writes them down and leaves them there. We'd never hear about it but for the fact that it's performed. The technology is such now that the explosion of such powerful performances are so uniquely available. The Internet has given a lot of this. At the same time, some people have problems with Google because they're showing places that they shouldn't be showing. So it's good and bad, but back to your point, I totally agree. I think that those means of communication where

islanders have traditionally been very thriving and powerful. Words are a very powerful thing. Things that I remember from conferences are not being produced. I still appreciate and—I don’t want to put Ty on the spot—but when we use that rope to connect everyone together, it’s far more effective than most of what was said that day because I don’t remember that. Even my favorite speakers, I don’t remember what it was they said, but I still remember the rope. It’s symbolic of growing up in the islands; I know the strong simple symbolism of ropes. I know what it takes to make ropes. I participated in making ropes and husking the coconut, burying it in the sand and beating and then drying it out and then weaving, pulling strands and watching my grandfather make it on . . . he uses his lap. So his lap is coarse from all of that. So he uses ashes from our cooking to smooth out his . . . before he makes. . . . So he uses this part of his leg when he creates that. And then when we make bigger ropes we make a lot of that and then I pull and pull. For me, the power that weaves all of that stuff, the time and energy it takes. I understand that very well and we try to do that. It’s not an easy thing to try to connect people, but we’re asking people to come together. Let’s put our hand and be connected to the rope before we start this thing.

Tengan: I want to mahalo you for taking the time. It’s been enlarging.

#### Notes

Mahalo to the Ethnic Studies office staff of Janette Yuasa, Paul Martin, Kira Hamamura, Shay Chun, Datson Nguyen, and Kaiewa Bello for assistance with setting up, recording, and transcribing the interview of Jojo Peter.

1. In 1947 most of the Micronesian islands formerly controlled by Japan became the United Nations “Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands” (TTPI) to be administered by the United States and prepared for decolonization and independence. In 1976 the Northern Mariana Islands separated from the TTPI and chose to become a commonwealth of the United States, making it an unincorporated territory like Guam and American Samoa. Negotiations in the 1980s led to the remaining nations of the TTPI forming three states—the Republic of the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, and the Republic of Palau, each of which entered into Compacts of Free Association (COFA) with the United States. These are the Freely Associated States, also known as the COFA States. For a policy-focused discussion of the distinctions between trust territory, unincorporated territory, and incorporated territory (those territories slated for statehood, e.g., Hawai‘i), see Allen P. Stayman, “U.S. Territorial Policy: Trends and Current Challenges,” *Pacific Islands Policy* 5 (Honolulu: East-West Center, 2009), [www.eastwestcenter.org/system/tdf/private/pip005.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=32349](http://www.eastwestcenter.org/system/tdf/private/pip005.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=32349). For an account of the role of Tosino Nakayama in creating “a nation out of islands and island groups whose residents did not see themselves as citizens of a larger political identity,” see David Hanlon, *Making Micronesia: A Political Biography of Tosino Nakayama* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2014), 216.
2. See Francis X. Hezel, *Making Sense of Micronesia: The Logic of Pacific Island Culture* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2013), 52–57.

3. For more information, see [www.healthypacific.org](http://www.healthypacific.org).
4. Pius Mau Piailug was the master navigator from the island of Satawal (in the state of Yap, Federated States of Micronesia) who guided the *Hōkūleʻa* voyaging canoe from Hawaiʻi to Tahiti in 1976 using traditional navigational methods, and who later taught Nainoa Thompson and others how to use the Carolinian navigational techniques he had mastered. On Kānehūnamoku, see Bonnie Kahepeʻa-Tanner, who discusses working with Mau's son Plasito Eseluquipi, who is now living and working in Hawaiʻi, on the Ka Holo Waʻa project, in "Sailing the Ancestral Bridges of Oceanic Knowledge," in *The Value of Hawaiʻi 2: Ancestral Roots, Oceanic Visions*, ed. Aiko Yamashiro and Noelani Goodyear-Kaʻōpua (Honolulu: University of Hawaiʻi Press, 2014), 173–80. See also the website of the Kānehūnāmoku Voyaging Academy at [www.Kanehunamoku.org](http://www.Kanehunamoku.org).
5. See Sam Low (producer, writer, director) and Boyd Estus (director), *The Navigators: Pathfinders of the Pacific* (Watertown, MA: Documentary Educational Resources, 1983). See also Nāʻalehu Anthony (producer and director), *Papa Mau: The Wayfinder* (Honolulu: Palikū Documentary Films, 2010), [oiwi.tv/wp/hokulea/papa-mau-the-wayfinder/](http://oiwi.tv/wp/hokulea/papa-mau-the-wayfinder/).
6. Kūhio Park Terrace (recently renamed the Towers at Kūhiō Park) is a public housing project in Kalihi where a large number of Micronesian families live and where Jojo conducts much of his outreach work. Residents of the housing take part in the cultural and ecological stewardship activities at Hoʻoulu ʻĀina, a one-hundred-acre forest preserve in the back of Kalihi Valley. It was here, under the tutelage of Plasito Eseluquipi, that Micronesian, Hawaiian, and other local youth and young adults participating in the Ka Holo Waʻa project carved the Micronesian canoe *Elleen Eoreni*, which was launched in January 2015. See [oiwi.tv/wp/oiwivt/elleen-eoreni-connecting-oceanic-pathways/](http://oiwi.tv/wp/oiwivt/elleen-eoreni-connecting-oceanic-pathways/).
7. Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner recently spoke on behalf of civil society at the UN Climate Leader's Summit, in particular about the impacts of climate change on Pacific Islanders. She concluded with a performance of her poem "Dear Matafele Peinem." Several videos of her work can be accessed at [jkijiner.wordpress.com](http://jkijiner.wordpress.com). Emelihter Kihleng has published a collection of poems, *My Urohs* (Honolulu: Kahuaomānoa, 2008).



Joakim “Jojo” Peter outside of George Hall, UH-Mānoa Campus, May 5, 2015. Photo by Ty P. Kāwika Tengan.