

## *Inside Me an Island: Poems*

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*Inside Me an Island: Poems*, by Lehua M. Taitano. Cincinnati: WordTech Editions, 2018. ISBN: 978-1-62549-283-8, 131 pages (paperback).

Lehua M. Taitano's second book of poems takes its title from the first poem of her first book, *A Bell Made of Stones* (2013, TinFish Press): "inside me an island / shaped hole" (13). Tied as it is in title to *A Bell Made of Stones*, it is difficult to see *Inside Me an Island* as a totally separate work, as this reviewer sees the latter primarily in comparison to the former. In the second, as in the first volume, many poems are characterized by their island appearance in typographic rivers (white space)—or in Taitano's case, typographic oceans—with single lines and, often, single words suspended therein. The cover of this slim volume shows a major portion of an LP record with a photo of a woman on the label, the white space of the mounting hole where her heart would be, an image provided by Lisa Jarrett, from *Mother Tongues: 100 Exercises in Empathy, Part 3*. This woman is smiling nonetheless.

*Inside Me an Island* comprises three parts: Correspondence, Ma're (Low Tide), and Hafnot (High Tide). The latter two sections place the work in the context of island and ocean, and each contains seventeen poems. As in her first book, Taitano, a Chamoru writer and artist, begins with a letter to or for the reader. The first is a "Letter from an Island (Maria Flores to Shelton Family, 1982.)" (13) that identifies a major theme of her work as familial interdependence. The second letter is "A Love Letter to the Chamoru People in the Twenty-first Century" (15). This letter provides Taitano's *Ars poetica*. The speaker writes: "Because I could not sleep. / Because I could not eat. / Because I do not want to get my mind off things, I am writing to you" (17). She is also, and especially, "writing our [the Chamoru people's] bodies into existence" (*ibid.*). She writes to all her kin and all her *saina* to tell them, "I see you. I hear you. I feel you. I love you" (18).

Writing from all diaspora, or from anyone who has left or lost a home, may seem nostalgic: homesick for either a place or a past. And Taitano's poetic, emotional, and intellectual ties to island are clear, but her poems are of differing structures, styles, and topics. A number of the poems are somatic: written with specifications of how the body (*soma*) of the writer is to be used or posed, for example, "Speak father, father, father, father, father, father until the story surfaces of your unravel" (43) or with the assignment to "Create a sibling, a counterpart to your shale-flaked centerself, a blood-bound projection to visit you upon the lonely scree" (26). Others are, admittedly, composed of series of overheard conversations (132), such as "Spectator" (37) or "Come Sit Around This Stone" (81), while still others seem to be and are perhaps based on conversations one has with oneself (and others?) inside one's head, such as "Sonoma" (100), where I am wondering if I should read the text sequentially or if I should read by position of text on the page and how would my experience of the poem differ if I did. Taitano describes this poem as "the love letter *Sonoma*. The elegy *Sonoma*. The maybe long poem *Sonoma*. The floating words swirling in a canoe *Sonoma*, for my brothers and sisters adrift" (99). A number of poems are also written *for* someone, dedicated to them (54, 66, 78, 81) and reflect strong personal ties of caring.

It is difficult to decide which of the poems in *Inside Me An Island* are my favorites. I am not Chamoru, and I am not queer (though different, perhaps), while Taitano self-describes as both (132). "Trespass" (52), however, evoked a visceral response of "been there": why is it that our

“late night ways” are criticized when the late shift provides more income? And aren’t streets spaces for public parking as well as driving? I also admire “Banana Queen” (49) for its spunk in the face of overt racism, for its Everywhere/Where/Nowhere serious wordplay, its treatment of “Guamanite / (Guamish, Guamese, Guamarian)” (ibid.), and its archery imagery. The image of sewing and sea in the poem “Here on the Seam” (87), like the arrow, is sharp, the poem clear and direct. Yet the long poems, “Sonoma” (100) and “Come Sit Around This Stone” (81), offer much for thought and meditation. I also find the dedication of the book to Taitano’s siblings and the recognition of her mother particularly meaningful.

The title *Inside Me an Island* comes from Lehua M. Taitano’s poem “inside me an island / shaped hole” (from page 13 of *A Bell Made of Stones*). If that island is still a hole, it is a hole filed with longing, with thought and experience, and with much caring for others as Taitano’s poetry shows. Together, the two volumes of Taitano’s work are, I believe, a valuable contribution to the growing body of indigenous Micronesian literatures. A personal essay by Taitano also appears in a recent anthology of these literatures; the essay contains one poem of eight quatrains (Flores & Kihleng 117).

### **Works Cited**

- Flores, Evelyn & Emelighter Kihleng (Eds.). *Indigenous Literatures from Micronesia*. U of Hawaii P, 2019.
- Taitano, Lehua M. *A Bell Made of Stones*. TinFish P, 2013.