

Lehua M. Taitano. *Inside Me an Island*. WordTech Editions, 2018. 134pp. ISBN: 9781625492838.

<https://www.wordtechweb.com/taitano.html>.

“The salt in our blood carries droplets of the ocean. No matter where we are, inside us is a liquid web connecting our beating hearts.” (Taitano, 17)

In her second poetry collection, *Inside Me an Island*, Chamoru interdisciplinary artist Lehua M. Taitano negotiates the distance between what Epeli Hau’ofa calls the “substantial regional identity ... anchored in our common inheritance of a very considerable portion of Earth’s largest body of water” (“The Ocean in Us” 392), and the horizon that symbolizes her displacement from her home island of Guåhan. Drawing on Hau’ofa’s conception of Oceania as a region that expands through the mobility of its people, Taitano’s poetry explores the unmooredness of her diasporic Chamoru identity. Thereby she emphasizes the ambiguous nature of oceanic mobility that entails both a vast network of archipelagic identities (Roberts and Stephens) and a scattered and displaced people.

The poet herself is a Native from Yigo on Guåhan (Guam), born to an American father and a Chamoru mother. Until she was four she was surrounded by Chamoru culture and family life, yet when the family decided to migrate to the US for good, Taitano was displaced from her home island, language and culture (Perez, “A Bell Made of Stones”). This feeling of displacement and unbelonging is a recurring subject in her poetry.

Inside Me an Island is structured in three parts: Correspondence, Ma’té (Low Tide) and Hafnot (High Tide). Its black and white cover shows a record and instead of a label there is a photograph of a smiling Chamoru woman, Maria Flores Taitano, the poet’s grandmother. By featuring personal memorabilia on the record label, the cover hints at topics of Taitano’s poetry that encompass memories, nostalgia, family, home and identity. The cover recalls the connection between poetry and music. Moreover, it claims the oral traditions on which Chamoru poetry is based. In his essay ‘Singing Forwards and Backwards’, Chamoru scholar and poet Craig Santos Perez suggests that contemporary Chamoru poets “are deeply woven into the aesthetics of the *tsamorita* tradition” (156), an ancient Chamoru call-and-response form of poetry. In her poetry Taitano interweaves the names and poetic approaches of other writers and artists and adapts Indigenous stories ranging from the Chamoru creation story to the Seneca Nation’s story of the origin of stories.

The first part of the poetry collection, Correspondence, begins with the poetic “transcription of a handwritten letter sent by [the poet’s grandmother] Maria Flores Taitano” (129). This letter poem features a Chamoru voice “from” Guam in an effort to bridge the distance that separates her from her diasporic family. In the following poem “A Love Letter to the Chamoru People in the Twenty-first Century,” Taitano assumes the role of the sender. Taitano explains that this and every letter she wrote and will write is addressed to the Chamoru people. In this personal letter the poet discusses how Chamorus struggle with issues of colonization, militarization, displacement, invisibility, environmental degradation and cultural erasure. Thus Correspondence establishes connections between Chamorus living on the island and in diaspora as well as between the poet and her audience.

The second part, Ma’té (Low Tide), and third part, Hafnot (High Tide), are named after the Chamoru terms to describe the ocean tides. By connecting oceanic terminology and metaphors with her mother tongue, Taitano claims and reconciles both her oceanic and her Chamoru identity. While the low tide describes the fall of the sea level that expands the land

mass and displaces the sea, it reveals the things that lie at the bottom of the ocean floor. The high tide, on the other hand, describes the rise of the sea level which increases the expanse of the sea and creates connections between different land masses and islands. Metaphorically speaking, the low tide could be understood as presenting displacement and disconnection. In countercurrent to that, the high tide would symbolize replacement and reconnection. Yet, in the constant movement of the ocean, the tides merge into one another. This intermingling is also reflected in Ma'te (Low Tide) and Hafnot (High Tide). Both low and high tide are part of the poetic journey to re-imagine home in diaspora.

Translating the ever-flowing movement of the sea, Taitano expresses herself through the versatility of her poetry. In 17 poems Ma'te (Low Tide) explores memories of the sea and her siblings (Shore Song, Create a sibling...), visitations of ancestral spirits (A Night Crowded With Night), erasure and reconnection (Islanders waiting for Snow), patriotism and militarism (Spectator), encounters with racism (Banana Queen) and the feeling of displacement (Trespass). Likewise, Hafnot (High Tide) explores nature and landscape of the mainland United States (Enchanted Rock, Texas) as well as the indigenous stories that are connected to the land (One Kind of Hunger). Taitano's poems also explore emotional memories of grief (An Oiled Groove) and love (Estuary).

With its queer female diasporic Chamoru voice, Lehua Taitano's latest poetry collection enriches the multiplicity of unique styles and voices of Chamorro poetry. Her collection includes short poems, long poems, somatic poems and fragmentary poems that remind the reader of Craig Santos Perez's use of field composition to express oceanic nature and aesthetic of his poetry (Heim 190).

Through her poetry Taitano rethinks oceanic identity by extending Hau'ofa's concept with another constant – the horizon. The horizon presents a fixed constant reminding the poet of the “island shaped / hole” inside her ever since her displacement from her home Guåhan (Taitano, *Bell* 1). Countering the uprooting effect of living in diaspora, Taitano realizes that the bridge to connect the fragments of her diasporic Chamoru cultural identity can be found in oceanic consciousness. In a similar inward movement as suggested by Hau'ofa's “The Ocean in us”, Taitano realizes that both her oceanic and her Chamoru identity are moored within her own consciousness and body. Moreover, by recognizing the ever-flowing movement of the sea and its manifestations in different shapes (in the vastness of the sky, oceanic clouds, snow, the river, a lake...) through her poetry, Taitano puts space and her own displacement into question. Adapting Perez's unconventional fragmentary form of poetry, Taitano reimagines the space on the page (see Hsu, 297). The title of the collection *Inside Me an Island*, on the other hand, indicates that her home island is interwoven in every action and poem of the artist. Space and displacement become dynamic concepts in an oceanic consciousness.

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