Iep Jaltok: Poems from a Marshallese Daughter

Review by PAULETTE M. COULTER

Iep Jaltok: Poems from a Marshallese Daughter by Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner, The University of Arizona Press, 2017. 82 pages. $14.95.

The University of Arizona Press released *Iep Jaltok: Poems from a Marshallese Daughter*, a debut book of poems by Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner on February 14, 2017. The slim but significant volume, the first collection published by a Marshallese poet, contains 28 poems in 81 pages, grouped into four sections: Iep Jaltok, History Project, Lessons from Hawai'i, and Tell Them.

Members of the University of Guam (UOG) community had the honor of hearing and watching the poet present some of her works on March 18, 2015, when she spoke about her writing and read a number of poems during the University's first Presidential Lecture of that year. The title of the lecture was also *Iep Jaltok*. In addition, *Storyboard 12*, the literary journal of UOG's Division of English and Applied Linguistics, published earlier versions of three of these poems, with titles corresponding to the second through fourth sections of the book. Many of Jetñil-Kijiner's works are also available on the Internet at https:// www.kathyJetñilkijiner.com as well as on Facebook and other social media, including presentations on YouTube. In addition, Jetñil-Kijiner's presentation to the United Nations on September 24, 2014, is available at http://www.un.org/climatechange/summit/2014/09/watch-marshallese-poet-kathy-Jetñil-kijiner-speaking-climate-summit. The poem she read there, and which made her an international figure in the climate change movement, is included in *Iep Jaltok.*

Many poems in *Iep Jaltok* are devoted to family. Many also, including those more directly about family, address the political (power) dynamics of the past and the cultural and environmental future of the Marshall Islands. Section 1 begins with the first of two poems in the book titled "Basket," discussed later, with its companion poem, in this review. The next three poems refer to Marshallese mythology. The content of the mythological poems is not original, being based on traditional myth, and similar versions of these myths are available in other sources. These translations or retellings, however, are still distinctive, somehow unique to their author, a Marshallese daughter. For example, in the final poem of this section Jetñil-Kijiner offers a song written by her great-grandfather, Carl Heine, translated by her mother on one page, along with a rewriting of her great-grandfather's life on the facing page. While some events in the great-grandfather's life are clear, such as his German birth, his affiliation with the Bible and religion ("searching for God"), his learning Marshallese, the loss of his first Marshallese wife – other aspects of his life are less clear. The speaker cannot visualize, for example, either the face of his first wife or of his second; neither can the speaker recall anything either great-grandmother might have said. Their faces are unclear and their voices vacant. Yet their "barnacled mouths," like those of the "giant clams . . . wide open" may suggest good teeth and good health. Given the nature of barnacles, however, the phrase might also mean the opposite.

Section 2, History Project, deals primarily with World War II, the postwar nuclear testing in the Marshall Islands conducted by the US military for over a decade, and the consequences of that testing for the "I" of the poems and for the relatives of this speaker, in particular, how the father was "hooked" on food provided by the Americans after the nuclear tests and after these tests destroyed the Marshallese food chain, despite its ill effects on his health. The "History

Project" the fifteen-year-old persona had worked diligently to prepare did not win because a judge commented that "it wasn't / really for the good of mankind, though, / was it?", having missed entirely the point the project was making. "The letter B is For" defines the word *bomb* and asks in Marshallese, as an example of its usage, if the reader is contaminated by radioactive fallout. One person affected by radioactivity – and therefore, her entire kinship network a generation or two after the bomb tests – is the speaker's niece, whose leukemia is causing the loss of her "Fishbone Hair" and will eventually take her life.

While many of Jetñil-Kijiner's poems address political imbalances, that is, inequalities of power, the poems in sections 2 and 3 do so most pointedly. In section 3, the reader encounters "Lessons from Hawai'i," seven examples of the intolerance of the Other and otherness that demonstrate what intolerance does to those who experience it. The seventh lesson in this poem illustrates the development of self-hatred in the speaker. In "The Monkey Gate," an airport employee replies to a Marshallese man asking where the Micronesian gate is by responding "*You mean the monkey gate?*" Although most of the lessons occur in Hawai'i, one takes place instead in Majuro when the speaker visits her grandmother and discovers that she is unable to communicate with her because she only speaks English and her grandmother only speaks Marshallese. But in "On the Couch with Bubu Neien" the speaker learns the lesson of communication without shared language, a lesson of shared thoughtfulness, shared family, shared gesture, shared smiles, shared love.

Besides the title poem "Tell Them" – asking friends to tell people in their homelands about her island nation in the central Pacific – poems in section 4 address a number of issues the world should know about the Marshall Islands. For instance, "Spoken Marshallese Lesson Nine" (the location and content of the other eight lessons are left unexplained) ends with the statement "I'm not an expert but I can try" to teach the questioner what it is the person wishes to learn. In "Just a Rock" the speaker acknowledges regretfully that she sees only a rock in looking at Lidepdepju, not a legend or a goddess. In "Campaigning in Aur" the speaker explains what she has come to understand in campaigning for and with her mother in a national election, which her mother, who is now president of the country, has won. The content of the poem is persuasive witness to the power of women in Marshallese culture.

Section 4 also contains the poem Jetñil-Kijiner wrote for the United Nations Climate Summit, referenced earlier, "Dear Matafele Peinam." Matafele Peinam is the poet's young daughter, and a slight shift in perspective toward the future occurs in this poem as the speaker promises her child that the current generation will not let her down. She insists there will be a future for the Marshall Islands, writing that "no one's losing / their homeland / no one's gonna become / a climate change refugee / [. . .] / no one else." The poems "There's a Journalist Here" and "Two Degrees" also address climate change. In the former, the speaker simply states that she wants a home like anyone else, a stable place to live and thrive. Two degrees are the difference between a normal temperature and fever in the speaker's child and the amount of global temperature change that may spell catastrophe for the Marshall Islands and other low-lying areas of the world. In this latter poem the speaker also suggests in the fourth stanza that "Maybe I'm / writing the tide towards / an equilibrium / willing the world / to find its balance," another message of hope.

Throughout the book's four sections, Jetñil-Kijiner presents several effective typographic poems, using spatial prosody, the visual arrangement of the poems on the page, to reinforce their themes. These include both poems entitled "Basket," parts of "Fishbone Hair," and "Lost at Sea." In "Lost at Sea," formatted on the page in the shape of a boat with sail, the poet focuses on

the lives of young Marshallese men adrift in the anomie, or lack of moral and ethical guidance, of cultural difference, giving the impression that in the city of Sacramento, California, islander lives are keel-less and that those lives are impoverished in the middle of material abundance, often overwhelmed by the fast and frantic pace of modern American life. As mentioned previously, "Fishbone Hair" refers to the speaker's niece, who is losing her hair because of her illness and its treatment, the child's hair falling like raindrops, or tears, on the page. Interestingly, while in "Lost at Sea" the term *white*, as in "white rice," "white cans of tuna," and "white envelopes," contrasts with "the earth of your skin / you warriors," the child in "Fishbone Hair" is named Bianca, which means white.

In the pair of "Basket" poems that open and close this volume of poetry, the reader needs to pay special attention to the use of pronouns as these small but important grammatical features affect the meaning of the poems. In the opening poem, the left side of the basket outline and the upper half of the right side employ the second person pronoun *you* while in the lower half of the right side, the first person *I* speaker completes the poem as her smile is woven into the rim of the basket. The closing poem begins in the same way, with the woman addressed as *you*. Halfway down the left side of the basket, however, this woman's body becomes "a country / we conquer / and devour / we take." But the question lingers provocatively in the mind of the reader or listener, just who are the *we* in this pronoun shift? On the right side of the basket outline, the woman is also addressed as *you*. Halfway down the right side of the basket, the *I* speaker completes the basket outline, this time though not with her smile but with the current of her words.

Another difference between the introductory and the concluding poems is in the opening of the poems and the opening of the baskets. In the introductory poem the left and right sides read:

"woman tip your lid
across the table
you swell
with offering"

"woman tip your lid
towards the table
you swell
with offering"

Here, only a single word differs in the second lines of the introductory poem – a*cross* is changed to *towards.* In the concluding poem, the baskets are no longer being worked at a table, but as follows:

"woman
tip your lid
across the land
you swell"

"woman
tip your lid
across the land
you swell"

No longer is the process of basket weaving merely a matter of a cultural art carried out at a table, but rather it reflects the weaving of a culture across the land. As the book's epigraph from the *Marshallese English Dictionary* indicates, the process of basket-making, iep jaltok, refers also to female children (the phrase, a common saying in the Marshalls, roughly translates into English as "you are fortunate to have a girl child") and the Marshallese matrilineal culture. The underlying, governing logic of these two poems is thus a radically profound cultural metaphor, that is, a metaphor at the root of culture.

Of the three poems published in *Storyboard 12* by the UOG Division of English and Applied Linguistics, I noted later changes in the *Iep Jaltok* versions in terms of lineation, the addition of stanza breaks to the wordstreams, and the separation of the seven individual lessons learned in Hawai'i, all of which mark the transition from spoken to written works, where vocal

inflections are replaced by visual cues for the reader, whether reading silently or aloud. In addition, the poet remarks in the journal at the beginning of "Lessons from Hawai'i" that the poem was "inspired by Emelihter Kihleng's poem 'Micronesian Question.'" She does not, however, indicate that UOG had published these poems (besides "Lessons," these poems were "history project" and "Tell Them") or what other poems in *Iep Jaltok* have been previously published and where. Although the note "About the author" indicates where the author has been featured, this publication information would allow readers to trace the evolution of the poems.

The tone of the poems in this book and the poet's evident control of language and image are uniformly fine. In some instances, as in the changes made in the three poems above since their publication in *Storyboard 12*, this book marks a transition in Jetñil-Kijiner's work from the strictly spoken poem to that of written, published poetry, intended to be read. Fortunately, the orality of the poems is not lost in publication, and in some ways is enhanced, as any reader can read them aloud, or read them in sync with the poet's own readings on YouTube. Nonetheless, publication of *Iep Jaltok* extends Jetñil-Kijiner's reach to various, primarily reading audiences throughout the world. As stated, the visual prosody of some of the poems also intensifies their meanings, something missed, or lost, in only hearing these works. Personally, I am pleased to see this publication, although I will continue to watch and listen to the poet's recordings. Her latest poem, for example, "The Butterfly Thief," can be found at https://www.kathyJetñilkijiner.com/butterfly-thief-and-complex-narratives-of-disappearing-islands/.

One of my only content criticisms of the book is the inclusion of the two California-based poems in Lessons from Hawai'i, especially "Last Days in the Bay Area." The brief note "To Laura Ingalls Wilder," while interesting, also seems misplaced. Furthermore, though perhaps more of a printing problem than a book construction problem, a few of the pages in my copy are printed very lightly (pages 36, 42, 63, for example). This contrast in uneven type weight can be distracting. Also disconcerting is the stated increase in population of the Marshall Islands from the publication of "history project" in *Storyboard 12* and "History Project" in the book. The increase in population by an order of magnitude, from 9,000 to 90,000 at the time of the nuclear testing, is remarkable, though possibly a typographical error. A Google check of more current (2016) population figures for the Marshall Islands indicates the population to be about 53,000.

These criticisms are relatively minor, however, and do not reduce the galvanizing effects of Jetñil-Kijiner's work. I strongly recommend that readers buy, read and experience *Iep Jaltoq*. Simply put, it does for Micronesia what Jetñil-Kijiner did for much of the UOG student body who attended her 2015 Presidential Lecture at UOG. It energized and inspired them because this woman is a poet, thinker, and activist from our region whose voice is now heard around the world (ironically, maybe even more than it has been heard here), someone who has been given the burden of speaking for her people and has both proudly and humbly assumed that responsibility, someone who in addressing a number of serious public, political issues has made them personal, someone who is doing something to deal with those issues, someone who inspires hope. On a large stage, Kathy appears to be a tiny woman. But she is a woman with a voice, speaking in poem, a voice that the United Nations Climate Summit 2014 invited and listened to carefully, a voice that speaks with eloquence for her nation and our region, a voice that has been heard and now can be heard over and over again as individuals read her published poems. This debut volume of Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner's poems teaches the power of one. A single voice can, and does, make a difference.