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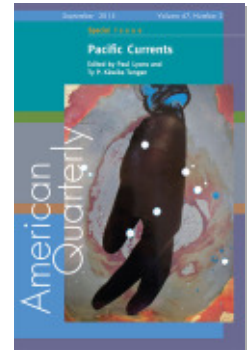
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American Quarterly, Volume 67, Number 3, September 2015, pp. 781-812
(Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2015.0059>



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Marshallese Cultural Diplomacy in Arkansas

Jessica A. Schwartz

The main thoroughfares of Springdale, Arkansas, in the northwest corner of the state, are dotted with fast-food and chain restaurants, gas stations, motels, and supermarkets. Familiar establishments such as McDonalds, Sonic, and Walmart occlude the cultural diversity that drives the municipal infrastructure. While the city is under two-thirds white, Latinos make up slightly over a third of the population and, Pacific Islanders—Marshallese in particular—make up just under 10 percent. About seven thousand Marshallese reside in Springdale, making it the largest concentration of Marshallese in the continental United States. The Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) established a consulate in Springdale in 2009, and Consul-General Carmen Chong-Gum has made strides in what she calls “cultural diplomacy,” or outreach efforts to the resident communities through Marshallese cultural productions. Chong-Gum uses the term *cultural diplomacy* with a specific definition in mind: when the consulate is involved in cultural programming, it is “cultural diplomacy.”¹ Church events, even if outsiders are invited to participate, are not organized by the consulate and are therefore not cultural diplomacy. Chong-Gum’s diplomatic efforts by way of Marshallese culture are novel and speak to the unique demands of living in Middle America (as opposed to an area with more Pacific Islander groups, for example).

In this essay, I detail the role of expressive culture in two recent instances of Marshallese cultural diplomacy in northwest Arkansas to share how this Marshallese diasporic community has created a unique politics of representation in Middle America. Outlining historical contingencies that make possible the imagination of cultural diplomacy between Marshallese and Americans, I extend and expand Chong-Gum’s definition of cultural diplomacy to show its roots in US Cold War cultural diplomatic efforts in the Pacific often discounted from historical records and its connections with the Marshallese community to transfigure their space and place of residence as theirs, where they welcome others into their culture yet maintain a palpable sense of distance. Heeding Teresia Teaiwa’s call to bring the Pacific “to the table as an equal partner” in

the “conversation about the nature of humanity or society,” I situate cultural diplomacy where Marshallese–American dialogue comes from the perspective of the Marshallese, and thus create a new framework of knowing.² Marshallese cultural diplomacy shares the ways in which Marshallese reinvent traditions and inheritances while perpetuating their collective culture and identity, often devalued in individualistic American society, in radically new contexts.

While there are a number of Marshallese diasporic communities, Springdale is, to many, the most surprising. Unlike Hawai‘i or the West Coast, other Oceanic diasporic populations do not make up a significant portion of the area’s social demography. Following Epeli Hou‘ofa, who describes Pacific Islanders traditionally as a people who “moved and mingled unhindered by boundaries” and who today are “doing what their ancestors had done before them: enlarging their world as they go,” I argue that as representatives of their country and region, Marshallese movements—musical, bodily, social, and political—in Springdale become extensions and negotiations of their home(s).³ Through diplomatic, especially musical, endeavors aimed to provide the space for educational attainment or dissemination, Marshallese emphasize their oral tradition, the educational value of *jitdam kapeel*, a Marshallese proverb that translates roughly to “seeking knowledge guarantees wisdom,” by learning about one’s family or lineage and one’s connections and relationships, and through their performance practices that uphold communality as an expression of Marshallese notions of freedom, which puts pressure on notions of a “free” association.

Working with the themes of connections, currents, and movements, this essay is structured into four main sections. I begin by outlining foundational connections between the United States and the RMI chronologically, with an emphasis on US Cold War expansionist policies that depended on “private resources for the implementation of cultural diplomacy via educational exchange.”⁴ Such educational models were more a one-sided exportation of American ideals and values than “exchange.” I then zoom in on Springdale to provide a portrait of the city’s geocultural milieu. The final two sections detail Marshallese efforts of cultural diplomacy, which are interrelated components of critical aims to productive transcultural communication and negotiation. The first case study is of Nuclear Remembrance Day 2013, which was held at NorthWest Community College in Bentonville, Arkansas. Here I explore the affective parameters of cultural diplomacy presented through the music and tears of Bikinians, a community fractured by violence and displacement, and how their performance was the impetus for collaborative outreach efforts between Marshallese and Americans. I then turn to the “Battle of the *Jeptas*”

event held at the Springdale High School auxiliary gym during Marshallese Constitution Day, which shows the efforts of Marshallese, acting on behalf of a nation and culture, to celebrate a value system based on coordinated efforts.

Connections

The geocultural and geopolitical connections between Americans and Marshallese are founded in the missionization of the atoll populations, which began in the nineteenth century. In 1857 Protestant missionaries from Boston, in cooperation with the American Board of Commissioners on Foreign Missions (ABCFM), extended their successful campaign of religious conversion in the Pacific (Hawai'i) to the Marshall Islands. Christianized native Hawaiians were trained by the ABCFM and sent to set up churches and the accompanying schoolhouses in these Pacific Islands. While only a handful of Americans were involved directly with the work of conversion, American Christian culture became the moral glue that bound these populations in the Pacific region, and as the diaspora brought Marshallese into Middle America, with large Protestant populations. The educational model of the church and schoolhouse and the emphasis on oral expressivity as a way to appeal to higher powers also shaped the relationship between the Americans and Marshallese. The moral and aesthetic education of the Marshallese was even more so geared to American individualism and socialization during the Cold War, which proves significant in Marshallese cultural outreach in Springdale.

During the Cold War, it was US policy and practice to use music and education, and music as education, as cultural diplomacy to promote a “shared” vision of humanity, democracy, and freedom, terms that are of course contested when we consider the varied communal organization and ways of being of populations that were devalued or ignored by the United States. Accounts of US Cold War cultural diplomacy often dismiss its role or impact on the Pacific region, but the Marshall Islands figure prominently in the use of cultural diplomacy by the United States to spread its ideology inside and outside the islands. This was afforded by historical contingencies, such as the 1944 defeat and expulsion of the Japanese by US troops and the coterminous promises of freedom and protection. Drawing from previous cultural connections established by American Protestant missionaries in the nineteenth century and in efforts to maintain distinctions from the Japanese, who prohibited Marshallese from Christian worship, President Harry S. Truman encouraged Americans who occupied the islands to emphasize Christian practices and

impart educational values and patriotic ideals by playing country and western songs, which now are a genre called *al in kaubowe* (cowboy songs), on the US military-operated radio.⁵

The Marshall Islands, in 1946, became part of an insidious component of US cultural diplomacy rooted in the mass mediation of atomic testing. Over “half the world’s supply of motion picture film” was sent to Bikini Atoll to capture the mushroom clouds that plumed over the Pacific.⁶ The verbal transaction between the US representative, Commodore Ben H. Wyatt, and the Bikinian representative Juda (coined “King Juda” by Wyatt) was a highly choreographed performance of international diplomacy, which was filmed, edited, and circulated to promote US nuclear dominance disguised as collaboration and friendship. Media dissemination of the event circulated worldwide and connected the Marshall Islands to a Cold War imaginary of widespread freedom and prosperity through mass destruction. Over twelve years (1946–58), the United States detonated sixty-seven nuclear weapons, sending lethal radioactive debris throughout the country and, in fact, the world. The powerful narrative of nuclear democracy and the media’s attention to visual representations of the US nuclear arsenal, however, relegated the Bikinian people and other Marshallese populations to a “silent past.”⁷

From 1947 through 1986, the United States administered the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands (TTPI), which included the atolls and islands of Micronesia. The United States insisted that the area be designated a “strategic trust” by the United Nations, which gave the United States the authority to prohibit access to and deny movement out of areas of the territory for security reasons.⁸ As trustee, the United States was obligated to protect the rights, safety, and health of the island populations without discrimination and advance educational attainment through infrastructural development. US cultural hegemony shaped Marshallese practices and material conditions. Government programs brought in teachers and Peace Corps volunteers to the islands to provide a standard American-based educational experience, which entailed reading, writing, and respect for US patriotism. Along those lines, Christianity—vehemently discouraged during Japanese administration—was reinforced for strategic purposes as the Truman administration encouraged missionaries to revive the religion that connected Americans and Marshallese. Modern technologies, like the motorboat that replaced the outrigger canoe, displaced and devalued traditional Marshallese ways of doing and being. The US military presence became an undeniable fact of life, most immediately perhaps on Kwajalein, an atoll with the world’s largest lagoon, which the

US military occupied after its World War II defeat of the Japanese and later became central to the US antiballistic missile testing program in the 1960s as well as the “Star Wars” missile defense system under President Ronald Reagan.

By the late 1970s there was a push toward decolonization throughout the Pacific region, and the majority of the atolls supported the forging of a sovereign nation. Some Marshalllese felt that the United States would eschew its responsibilities if the country became an autonomous nation. For example, the Bikinians voted against the RMI–US Compact of Free Association. Ultimately, the agreement was signed by the two governments in 1986 and was renewed in 2003. The Compact is an economic, political, and military agreement that stems from nuclear damages and present-day military occupation of lands for missile testing. The Compact allows Marshalllese to live, work, and travel “freely” in and between the United States and the RMI.⁹ While the terms of the Compact ensure financial assistance and military protection to the RMI, there is an espousal clause that states that the United States, having paid a lump sum to cover nuclear damages, is absolved from further financial responsibilities for nuclear damages. This leaves the RMI to incur future expenses, costs that are inadequately measured by the agreement.¹⁰ On April 5, 2010, the US Supreme Court declined to hear a case for “just compensation,” a case brought forward by the Bikinians, on the grounds that the Republic of the Marshall Islands, as a sovereign nation in free association with the United States, must “settle the claims of its citizens.”¹¹

As a governmental complex, the RMI works to settle these claims, but given the sociopolitical disparities between atoll groups, and the fact that currently one-third of the entire Marshalllese population now lives in the United States, this is no easy task. The RMI has political representation in the United States through its embassy in Washington, DC, and two consulates, one in Honolulu and the other in Springdale. Diplomatic relations that draw from, yet are not beholden to, the colonial legacies and interactions between the cultures are important mechanisms to explore how historical modes of representation affect certain claims to redress, social justice (e.g., equal access to health programs, education), and cultural rights.¹² Marshalllese officials, particularly the consul-generals, assist diasporic communities in navigating the laws and procedures within their host nation and serve as diplomatic representatives. Through their outreach efforts, they are agents of political change, which manifests in particular ways as cultural diplomacy—a form of intercultural knowledge production.¹³ The movement and settlement of Marshalllese in Arkansas has created surprising new articulations that maintain indigenous

connections through educational exchanges. I now turn to an exploration of the economic and cultural particularities that have necessitated Marshallese outreach gestures in Springdale.

Springdale, Arkansas

In 2009 the RMI consulate in Costa Mesa, California, was closed and a new consulate office was opened in Springdale, and Chong-Gum was appointed consul-general. While there had been several cultural outreach efforts over the five years prior to the consulate's opening, the appointment of Chong-Gum, who was previously the cultural liaison at the Northwest Arkansas Multicultural Center, as its head diplomat began a concerted effort to advance the community and its culture. Chong-Gum, who was born in the Marshall Islands, does not consider Springdale her home, calling it, in the words of Dale Carpenter's script for the 2005 documentary *A New Island: The Marshallese in Arkansas*, a "new island in the middle of Arkansas."¹⁴ This "new island" in Middle America is devoid of other Pacific Islander groups. Unlike Hawai'i or the West Coast, there are no other islander communities with a long history of settlement and interaction; the Marshallese are living in Springdale with no template.

The city sits at the crossroads of cultures, economies, and political pursuits. It extends over two geographic regions (the Midwest and the South) and is part of two counties (Washington and Benton). Springdale's sudden demographic shift from 1990 through 2000 primed the residents' reception of the Marshallese and provided some of the infrastructural support that proved important to cultural outreach efforts. Before 1990 primarily Anglo-Americans populated the northwest corner of the state.¹⁵ Within a decade, the number of nonwhites increased by 280 percent.¹⁶ Springdale, officially recognized by the state as "The Poultry Capital of the World," is home to Tyson Foods, a Fortune 100 company and the world's largest producer of protein; it is also the city's largest employer, with 4,300 employees. George's, another poultry producer, is the city's second-largest employer at 2,500 employees, and Cargill, which processes turkey at its Springdale facility, ranks fourth, with 1,200.¹⁷ The growing poultry industry prompted massive immigration into the area in the 1990s, led by the Hispanic community. A 2007 study commissioned by the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation in Arkansas noted that the state had the fourth-fastest-growing immigrant population nationwide between 1990 and 2000, at 196 percent. Washington County's foreign-born population increased by 460 percent during that same decade.¹⁸ By 2010 the two coun-

ties' combined population had reached 424,404, compared with 210,908 just twenty years earlier.¹⁹

Juxtaposed with Fayetteville, a liberal college town to the south, Springdale is a conservative, business-oriented city. With the growth of the Hispanic population, which tripled to 12,000 between 1990 and 1995 alone, there were major cultural clashes.²⁰ In 1995 local business and government leaders established the Multicultural Center of Northwest Arkansas to serve as a bridge between business, government, and the community by providing information about available service resources and offering translation and interpreter services, primarily for the Latino population. The goals listed on the organization's now-defunct website are, first, to "stabilize the workforce," second, to "solve social problems, and develop financial and civic responsibility," and third, to develop "cultural understanding."²¹ An infrastructure soon developed to meet the needs of Spanish-language speakers. With the business-oriented focus of many of the programs, small businesses owned by Hispanic entrepreneurs began cropping up.²² Other nonprofit organizations and agencies that focused on integration and better cultural relations between the Hispanics and white populations emerged, including a chapter of the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC). It is telling, however, that LULAC Council 754, which was established out of concern for "the absence of an effective voice for Latinos in this [northwest Arkansas] area," was founded not in Springdale but in Bentonville, a city experiencing a different sort of massive migration.²³

Bentonville, north of Springdale, is home to the world's largest retailer, Walmart (fig. 1). In the 1990s a more affluent, diverse population that serviced Walmart began relocating to the Bentonville area. Procter and Gamble was the first large-scale supplier to open an office in the region in 1989. Hundreds more followed suit. The boom began in 1993, as vendors flowed into northwest Arkansas to be closer to Walmart headquarters.²⁴ Having a permanent location in the area meant suppliers and buyers played golf on the same courses and attended church together, giving those with a local presence a major advantage, especially given the unique Walmart culture that values personal connections.²⁵

A new regional airport facility, surrounded by pasturelands and chicken houses, yet large enough to land Air Force One and just miles from Walmart's major distribution center, was dedicated in 1998 by Arkansas native President Bill Clinton.²⁶ Business leaders began investing in these two Benton County cities by, most visibly, building a high-end shopping center. Despite all the beautification projects that focused on Rogers and Bentonville (Fayetteville to the south was used as a model, with its green space and trail system), Spring-



Figure 1. Walmart headquarters in Bentonville, Arkansas. Photo courtesy of April L. Brown.

historical town squares, parks, and green-friendly buildings, dilapidated buildings and empty storefronts flank Springdale's downtown main street, Emma Avenue, with "For Lease" signs posted in the windows. The majority of the Marshallese community resides on the eastern part of the city in apartment complexes, duplexes, and rental homes (fig. 2).

For Marshallese, who have a nonimmigrant status, out-migration to Springdale began in the mid-1980s, increased after 2000, and continues to grow. Marshallese come to Arkansas to find employment, better health care, and educational opportunities, to address environmental concerns (nuclear contamination and climate change), and to join their families. The first Marshall Islander to arrive in the early 1980s, John Moody, had attended college in Oklahoma on a scholarship, but dropped out and moved to Springdale to work for Tyson. The post-2000 migration was prompted partly by a climbing unemployment rate in the RMI from 30.9 percent in 1999 to 33.6 percent in 2004 (projected).²⁸ The RMI government is the nation's largest employer,

dale, which is home to the majority of the region's immigrants, was ignored by influential donors.²⁷ While the other three major northwest Arkansas cities tout their

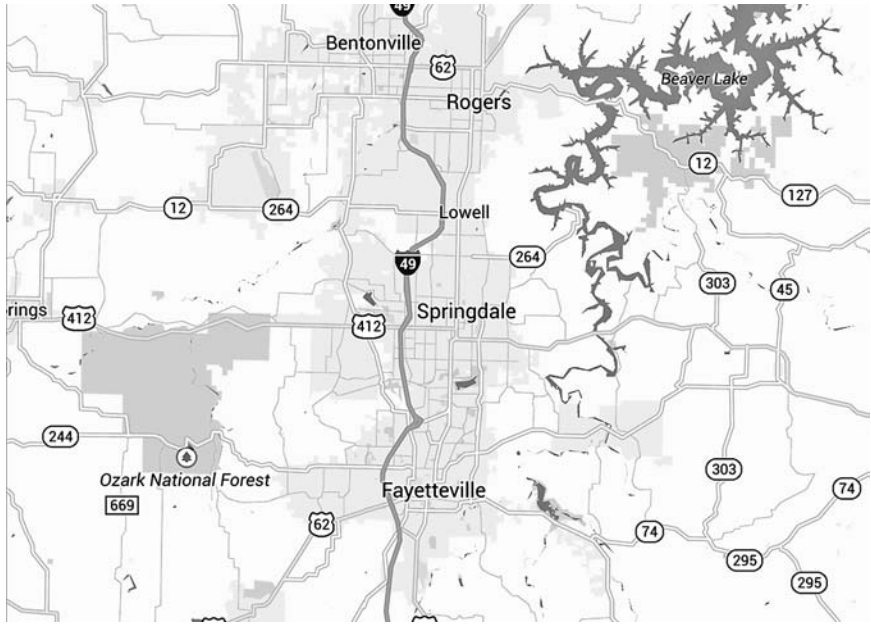


Figure 2.
Map of Northwest Arkansas. Google Maps.

and reductions in the workforce in the late 1990s, as well as fears that cuts in Compact funds would restrict travel privileges, contributed to the increase of Marshalllese moving to Arkansas. Advertised employment opportunities at Tyson motivated Marshalllese to leave the RMI for Arkansas. In 2001 an indictment by the federal government accused Tyson Foods of human trafficking, namely, smuggling illegal workers from Mexico and Central America and providing them with fake documentation.²⁹ The “largest case brought against an American company involving the smuggling of immigrants” led the multinational company to actively recruit Marshalllese, whose legal status was clear, especially with added visa and employment restrictions after the events on September 11, 2001.³⁰ The relatively low cost of living in Arkansas, compared with Hawai‘i and California, has been a factor in terms of diasporic relocation.³¹

The Marshalllese community tended to remain under the radar, partly because of its purposeful self-segregation. However, as the Marshalllese population grew in Springdale throughout the decade—a 294 percent increase between 2000 and 2010—so too did the negative press and stigmatization of the community.³² Marshalllese were presented as having high leprosy and tuberculosis

rates, unsanitary living conditions given overcrowding, and inappropriate parent–child relationships.³³ Their reported reluctance to seek medical attention and a reliance on traditional healing practices caused spas of panic among the local population, many of whom feared potential outbreaks of infectious diseases, which they blamed on the Marshallese.³⁴ The Marshallese community also encountered legal problems over lost passports and I-94 work cards, driving without a license or insurance, and violating various municipal noise disturbance laws.³⁵ The belief that all Marshallese residents receive a hefty check from the US government as compensation for US nuclear testing still fuels resentment from many local residents. When the Marshallese were not the subject of negative reporting by the local media, they were showcased in static picture form, “exotics” with their colorful clothing, singing, and dancing.³⁶

Stigmatization combined with the communal and close-knit nature of the community often precludes interaction with non-Marshallese residents. Saturdays are often spent celebrating *keemem*, first birthdays, and Sundays spent worshipping at church. Softball, volleyball, and basketball tournaments for men and women are common, especially when held in conjunction with celebrations like RMI Constitution Day (celebrated in the United States on Memorial Day weekend), Namdrik Day, and Jaluit Day, among others. Like in the Islands, Marshallese families are large, and often three generations share the same living space. Individualism is not as valued as communality and collectivity.

The negative feedback loop between social marginalization and continued maintenance of insular diasporic communities was addressed in a 2012 article by the anthropologist Laurence Marshall Carucci, “You’ll Always Be Family: Formulating Marshallese Identities in Kona, Hawai‘i.” Carucci writes,

On the Big Island, Marshallese have no control over the larger milieu within which they live. This unanticipated insecurity has driven them toward insularity within their own group. It has heightened their commitment to “being Marshallese,” and their Marshallese identity has been fashioned and reinforced through an elaboration of daily routines that involve members of the community with one another and separate them from non-Marshallese.³⁷

In Springdale, Marshallese ways of being and doing—Marshallese cultural practices—are sometimes viewed by non-Marshallese as a refusal to recognize the region’s societal norms, but there are other cultural practices that are respected, such as Marshallese devotion to Protestant worship.

Away from other Oceanic communities, Marshallese have to overcome many obstacles when relocating to Springdale. Language barriers and low levels of educational attainment leave few employment opportunities for Marshal-

lese beyond entry-level positions, and very few Marshallese fill supervisor or management roles. Discrimination, at work and in schools, given a lack of cultural or situational understanding is compounded by different modes of communication. Americans tend to be more confrontational than Marshallese, and outward criticisms can be taken harshly. For example, some public school officials vocally criticize what they perceive as parents' lack of interest or support for their children's education, going so far as to show up at Marshallese houses and berate parents, who, without command of the English language themselves, are left feeling ashamed and without recourse.

Transportation in Springdale is a problem for many Marshallese who are used to living with extended family and thus sharing vehicles with family and friends. Tardiness or failure to show up for work has been cause for suspension without pay. Essential documents like applications, insurance forms, and tax documents are seldom translated into Marshallese. Neither are safety signs in workplaces or the public transit schedule. The Marshallese generally work second and third shifts, which means that they are not there when their children return home from school, when extracurricular activities commence, or when parent-teacher conferences are scheduled. Most Marshallese do not have insurance. Given the health problems within the community, particularly diabetes, visits to the hospital emergency room are more frequent than are checkups. When in the hospital, the Marshallese are sometimes mistreated.³⁸ Certainly, suspicions of American doctors and health care in general are a legacy of the testing era, particularly among Marshallese who, unwittingly, were part of a secret US study on the effects of radiation on human beings, Project 4.1.³⁹

Amid these struggles, there also exist people within both communities who acknowledge the need for transcultural education and acceptance. The realization in both communities and between their official representatives is important. So too is the Marshallese custom to welcome outsiders into their community activities, such as a church service or national celebration. Further, an outsider's attendance and interest in Marshallese culture is usually celebrated. There is some economic advancement as well. Marshallese businesses are opening up, and although some close within months, the Marshallese entrepreneurs who choose to set up shop are making statements by claiming a stake in the local economic topography. Some local businesses, like video stores, grocery stores, and Asian restaurants, are beginning to target the Marshallese in their advertising. Marshallese were once targeted in advertisements only by bail bondsmen, check cashers, and used car dealers, which contributed to the aforementioned stereotypes.

As a “compact community” (what appears to be a relatively marginal, isolated social formation) redefined through quotidian dynamics and exceptional performances, the Marshallese community in Springdale has both maintained a degree of insularity, given cultural and economic barriers, and shifted the tendency, in large part, because of the RMI government’s encouragement, particularly through the Springdale consulate, to invest in cultural outreach performances. While for some an island conjures up notions of insularity and isolation, it is important to recall that, for Marshallese, an island (*aelōñ*) is the land above the currents. The currents provide the pathways to other islands and families. Scholarship on Oceanic perspectives, particularly Epeli Hau’ofa, who views the Pacific as a “sea of islands” rather than “islands in a far sea,” has also worked to disentangle notions of migration and diaspora from processes of rupture and fragmentation.⁴⁰ Thinking beyond Springdale’s municipality as “landlocked” in the middle of America, the metaphor of the “new island” reanimates the land and its possibilities for connection—connection with Americans and their government and connection with Marshallese heritage. Both, Chong-Gum believes, can be achieved through cultural diplomacy, which, in her terms, are projects that raise cultural awareness with specific educational, political, and economic goals in mind. The sound worlds that follow animate histories left out of Springdale school district’s history books; these are complex histories that are approached through many musical voices and bodies circulating outside the processing plants of Tyson Foods.

Affective Diplomacy

On February 28, 2013, at North West Arkansas Community College (NWACC) in Bentonville, two Bikinians, Nixon Jibas and his cousin Jim Lewis, sang “I jab pad mol.” Their performance was part of Marshall Islands Nuclear Victims and Survivors Memorial and Remembrance Day 2013, an RMI-recognized holiday to commemorate the Bravo detonation, the largest thermonuclear device detonated by the United States that sent irradiated coral dust across inhabited atolls in the Marshall Islands. The event was part of a themed semester focused on the Marshall Islands at the college, coordinated by Professor April Brown, the school’s Honors Program director. The themed semester was instituted in 2009 as an interdisciplinary program to bring in speakers, performers, and local specialists in the area to the classroom. The Marshall Islands-themed semester was also intended to dispel negative stereotypes and counter the decreasing enrollment of Marshallese students. Event planners at the college reached out

to Chong-Gum to coordinate programming, and the consul-general suggested that the Remembrance Day be held at the college. During the event, Chong-Gum read a message from RMI president Christopher Loek that demanded all classified documents pertaining to the testing be released to the Marshallese. Then, Faith Jibas, Nixon's wife, introduced the Bikinian anthem. The musical performance that followed—an affective act of cultural diplomacy—served as the catalyst for future educational outreach efforts.

Hundreds of Bikinians reside in Springdale. Politically aware and mobilized, the Bikinians remain committed to their Cold War mediated status as exceptional exiles. Many Bikinians view their legal dialogue with US officials in the form of direct testimony to Congress, lawsuits filed against the US government, and compensation, as US legitimization of their sacrifice made during the nuclear testing period and recognition of their exceptionalism as a people distinct from other Marshallese. Jack Niedenthal, an American serving as the Bikinian Trust Liaison, interviewed Bikinian *iroij* (chief) Dretin Jokdru about the US-Bikinian relationship. After Jokdru stressed that the US-Bikinian relationship should never end, Niedenthal asked how he would react if the United States did not live up to its obligations. Jokdru responded, “We will remind them of our history together, we will remind them of how we have sacrificed for them, then we will ask them to continue to take care of us. That was their promise and we will hold them to it.”⁴¹ Jokdru spoke of the Bikinians' direct, intimate relationship with the US government, a relationship he viewed as reciprocal. Thus the manner in which Bikinians reach out to Americans through an affective diplomacy is possible only by making legible the terms of the Bikinians' removal.

“Men otemjej rej ilo bein Anij” (Everything is in God's hands), the words King Juda said to Commodore Wyatt that performatively transferred Bikini Atoll to the US military for testing, has become the Bikinian motto or MORIBA—an acronym for Juda's words. These words are now central in Bikinians' oral histories of the testing as motivation to reflect on and share their present-day concerns, embodying their original diplomat—King Juda. The ever-present MORIBA appears on T-shirts and baseball caps, and is painted in shoe polish on the back window of pickup trucks owned by Bikinians in Arkansas and Oklahoma, which borders Arkansas to the west.⁴² The Bikinians in Springdale created a MORIBA club, and Nixon Jibas is the president. For the past five years, he has been hosting “Bikini Day” in March to mark the anniversary of the 1946 removal of the Bikinians from their atoll in preparation for US nuclear testing, and to commemorate Bravo, the weapon that left his



Figure 3.

The Bikinian flag is held during May Day celebrations in Springdale, Arkansas, by a member of the MORIBA Club. Photo courtesy of April L. Brown.

customary land uninhabitable. For Bikinians, this is their “national holiday” at which they sing their “national anthem” and raise their “national flag” (fig. 3). These national symbols

were codified in 1987 as a response to the Compact, which prohibited Marshallese redress in the US courts, and their circulation resists the notion of “free association” and demands a rehearing.

Rather than invoke an explicit indigeneity or cultural dynamicism, Bikinians tend to secure themselves in their “nation” and their people because the “known Bikini”—the majority of Bikinians today have never seen Bikini Atoll, their namesake—is a myth and mediated abstraction. By stressing themselves a “nation,” Bikinians resist the US Supreme Court’s decision that the RMI should settle their claims and align themselves with the US nation (as opposed to the RMI). Some see a kinship with the neighboring Cherokee nation, a highly visible indigenous group forcibly removed by the United States to eastern Oklahoma. Through association, and particularly musical expression, Bikinians remind us of their status as indigenous nuclear nomads. Nixon Jibas feels that proximity to Americans is advantageous (or should be) in the pursuit of justice for “[his] people, the Bikinians.”⁴³

Even if the words are not explicit, my interlocutors explained that the motto MORIBA underlies certain musical expressions. Bikinians feel that singing, literally, connects them with Americans and allows them to maintain a complex national-indigenous self-determination by employing their voice in intelligible musical forms, resisting unintelligibility, and preserving vocal traditions that animate cross-generational sociality and education. As the Bikinian councilman Hinton Johnson explained:

Even though the words *men otemjej rej ilo bein Anij* are not explicitly said in the national anthem, when you talk about MORIBA, you always imagine the national anthem. So, we always sing the anthem and then say the words, and then we pray for the words. This is how the MORIBA always goes with the anthem.⁴⁴

At the remembrance event held at the community college following Faith Jibas's introduction and before singing the Bikinian anthem, Nixon Jibas opened with a brief disclaimer, "Myself and my cousin over here, we will try our best. There are over 400 people from Bikini here in Northwest Arkansas, but as you all can see, there is only two of us, but we will try." On the last words, his voice lifts and then lowers. "We will go from here," he says softly.

Jibas marks, with his words and affective delivery, a Bikinian people severed. He later explained that he was anxious because he felt as though he were in charge of the "most important part of the ceremony." As the men begin to sing, their voices are shaky, and midway through the first phrase, both men begin to cry. Brown noted the impact of the performance on the crowd, in that there seemed not to be a dry eye in the entire room of about one hundred Marshallese and fifty non-Marshallese attendees. Many of the college's students and staff in attendance, most of whom remained long after the event's conclusion, remarked how the Bikinians' performance was the most moving of the afternoon.⁴⁵

Crying as an emotional reach, and affective gesture to Bikinians and Americans alike, inflects the musical material, the phrasing, the melody that was most likely derived from one or another combination of a nineteenth-century Western navigation song, a Japanese tune, and a hymn. There is the audible struggle toward "peace" (the word *aenōmman* that follows the men's silence) in the loss of voice because of crying, which is the affective and material representation of sadness—the emotion experienced when there is a loss, and the consequent inability to sing together, or harmonize. The performance, as a diplomatic gesture, also exists in the concentration of the word *peace*, when the men stabilize their voices in a dynamic swell.

You know, that was another thing, singing in front of Americans and knowing you guys are there and that is where all this—the moving of people—came from. It's really a different experience because you know you are showing Americans that we are still here. We are in Arkansas 60 years later.⁴⁶

Jibas explained, “My own meaning, ‘*I jab pad mol, aet I jab pad*’ is like I’m telling myself not to relax, you know. I want to do something and get it done with other people and let the world know, ‘hey, we’re from this island. We are the reason why this world is peaceful. It is because of our people.’” When referring to “our people,” Jibas says that he is referring to Bikinians.⁴⁷ The cry breaks in the anthem are the reflective spaces to recall a promise of freedom, a rhetoric of peace, and a national sentiment inscribed in a silent, violent historical amnesia that a song of mourning turned national anthem aims to amplify. Bikinians in Arkansas are concerned that their contributions will continue to be unrecognized by Americans unless they assert themselves as distinct and legible. “*I jab pad mol*” was translated in the program, and the historical events that led to this musical performance were explained to the audience. In the assessment of critical song choices, Bikinians choose to reveal the production of their global exceptionalism as part of an imagined American exceptionalism.

The Bikinians’ affective performance at NWACC opened avenues for future educational outreach. The event made the front page of the local newspaper the next day. “Testing Impact Still Echoing: Thermonuclear Detonation Shapes Marshallese Lyrics,” was the headline in the *Benton County Daily Record*.⁴⁸ The story was also picked up by the state’s main newspaper, the *Arkansas Democrat Gazette*, which ran it regionally. Ultimately, the story prompted a radio story, “Marshallese Atomic Songs,” by the local National Public Radio affiliate, KUAF. The reporter Jacqueline Froelich, who has shown interest in the Marshallese, whom she calls “Ozark Islanders,” interviewed me about the subject; the program ran in June 2013.⁴⁹ The Bikinian gesture of cultural diplomacy and the tears and cross-cultural dialogue it evoked among Marshallese and American audience members was also the direct impetus behind the founding of the Marshallese Educational Initiative (MEI).⁵⁰ The Springdale-based nonprofit is the first in the United States established to promote cultural and historical awareness of the Marshallese through educational programming. The Bikinian performance also provided inspiration to those who planned the “Battle of the *Jeptas*.”

Battle of the *Jeptas*

The thirty-fifth RMI Constitution Day was held in Springdale May 23–26, 2014. In the RMI, Constitution Day, or “R.M.I Jemenei Day” as it is advertised in Arkansas on flyers and Facebook posts, is held on May 1, but in the United States, it is held over Memorial Day weekend, which gives Marshallese more time to celebrate and allows family members and sports teams visiting from out of state (or country) a holiday weekend in which to travel. That the events are held over what the United States recognizes as a day to remember those who died in the service of the nation is also telling of the sacrifices that all Marshallese have made and continue to make, whether it’s their own lands or bodies, for the United States to maintain strategic interests and military readiness.⁵¹ Marshallese take the imperial nationalistic time-space and insert their cultural productions.

The cover for the Constitution Day program visually represents the optic of Marshallese centrality and provides clues to indigenous customs that are key to survival in diaspora. Three flags surround the national seal of the RMI: the United States, Arkansas, and the RMI. The Arkansas state flag is located centrally, under the seal, positioning it as an intermediary. Below the array of national symbols reads “Iniwijet Lōkadimdim,” which is the theme of the 2014 celebration, along with a sketch of a traditional outrigger canoe with sail and a close-up picture of the sennit (*ekkwāl*) rope knot pattern that holds the parts of the canoe in place.

Iniwijet Lōkadimdim is a Marshallese proverb that comes from navigational terminology; it describes how to tie the rope tightly so that the canoe stays together. This oft-cited “metaphor for life” means that there are different ways a community can be together, but to be strong and united, the community’s members must work toward a common goal. The planning committee felt that the archaic proverb resonated with the diasporic community in Springdale, and through the weekend’s activities, the common goal of togetherness and cultural persistence was strengthened. For the past two RMI Constitution Day celebrations, an important goal has been to reach out to non-Marshallese residents with a gesture of cultural diplomacy, according to Chong-Gum. This has been attempted through the production titled “Marshall Islands late Christmas Festival in Northwest Arkansas showcasing *Battle of Jepta Concert*.”⁵²

Marshallese from all atolls participate in the festivities that mark the official beginning of the Christmas season (*Kūrijmōj*). These activities entail competition between songfest (song and dance) groups (*jepta*) made up of

church congregation members, most frequently teenagers and young adults, who practice late into the night for weeks leading up to the Christmas season. The word *jepta* is a Marshallese pronunciation of the English word *chapter*, a reference to chapters in the Bible. In addition to its roots in Christianity, the *jepta* performance itself has deeper meaning in Marshallese traditional culture.

Carucci states of *Kūrijmōj* that “[it] not only seeks the renewal of life; simultaneously, it *is* life in the process of its actualization or becoming.”⁵³ It is a celebratory exchange geared to prosperity, and it therefore depends on the maintenance of the social roles for reproduction. The *jepta* performances entail gendered separation and coordinated physical movements based on following the orders called out by the lyrics and prompted by a militaristic whistle blown by the group leader, who also shouts directions. Today, the Yamaha keyboard autorhythmic accompaniment enables the group to stay in time and *piit* (beat-dance) together. The songfests and *piit* dances afford mobility into the protected church environment, and in diaspora, they are signs of cultural mobility as well.

In 2009, when I lived on Ejit Island (Majuro Atoll, RMI), the island’s youth director, whom I knew simply as Randy, told me about the performance by his *jepta* that I had watched the night before. It was written by one of the older women living on Ejit.

[Our performance] last night was about a fight. This was not a real fight, it’s just an analogy, but it was a fight between the east and the west [tracts of land on the island]. The fight was about who was the best at making up songs and dramas. The song is about who you are, what you do, and how you make the *jepta*, or how you work with the singing group. The song is about your life, it [provides commentary on] your life. Wherever you go, you bring this [song], enjoy the [music], and the goods. So the song talks about your life to make it good.⁵⁴

Randy moved from talking about the performance to talking about the song, which spoke of the actions in the performance and pointed to the historical composition of the *jepta*. Each group’s identity was based on one’s tract of land and inheritance, and it is a product of potentially alienable chiefly land. Who cares the most for their land? Who cares most for their people? Who cares most for their lineage? The occasion for musical performance allows people to learn from their elders, share their life stories, and archive their customary skills in a performance that concerns how well they know how to care for their inheritance.

Jeptas have been held in Springdale in Marshallese churches for over a decade. In the Marshall Islands, *jeptas* reflected clan (“family”) or atoll identities.

Interlocutors have pointed out that audience members were quick to note the characteristic jepta from Ebon or Namdrik as examples. In the United States, the churches are composed of Marshallese from different atolls, and the jepta reflects not the clan but the church (although sometimes a family orientation will dominate a church). The songs and choreography of the jeptas are imports from the RMI that come from the generation older than the performers and speak to a more cosmopolitan indigeneity aimed at promoting, or preserving, a culture based on national affiliation.

The function of jepta in Marshallese diaspora promotes a similar mode of intergenerational learning through oral tradition and performance. Marshallese living in Springdale sometimes are unfamiliar with jepta composition and choreography, and thus adopt (and adapt) preexisting songs and dances from the RMI, the knowledge of which is brought over by recent transplants. Jepta affords Marshallese Americans (US citizens) and Marshallese who moved to Springdale at a young age the opportunity to participate in *jitdam kapeel*.⁵⁵ The contemporary usage of *jitdam kapeel* affords a broader contextualization, perhaps definition, of the family—in a global sense (possibly even religious). The proverb implies a process of personal growth and communal empowerment that stems from an openness to engage with others, a number of others, by asking questions, listening thoughtfully, synthesizing different answers, and sharing information. This type of education depends more on the learning participant to ask questions, rather than imagine a prescribed curriculum, and it takes into consideration that not everything has an answer. *Jitdam kapeel* also necessitates a space for Marshallese to ask these questions and to welcome others into their space to make appeals for knowledge and simply to be heard.

Jeptas take place everywhere that significant Marshallese diasporic communities are found and are performed in Marshallese churches or at rented locations, such as Springdale's Bingo Hall, which I witnessed in 2011. The performances are occasionally attended by a few non-Marshallese, but the events are not advertised in non-Marshallese circles; attendance is free. There are no printed programs that detail the lineup, and there is no prize for a winner. The term *competition* is loosely implied in that respect, where winning and losing are flexible terms.

The "Battle of Jepta Concert," held on May 24, 2013, at the Springdale High School gym, or as it is referred to by the Marshallese community, Bulldog, named after the school's mascot, was a very different kind of event from those performed in the churches, and it communicates, more than anything, a more-nuanced appreciation for the attention to performance of a cultural knowledge

that is at once revealed and concealed, and the “unevenness” of cultural translation.⁵⁶ For Chong-Gum, the event epitomized her conceptualization of “cultural diplomacy.” Determined to secure scholarships for Marshallese high school students in Springdale to encourage college enrollment, she conceived of a plan to raise funds for tuition while promoting cultural awareness. Chong-Gum and Antia Tomeing-Iban, a Marshallese community liaison for the Springdale school district, did the majority of the planning along with other Marshallese school liaisons, but also included regular meetings with church leaders and a few Springdale educators. A major task for the core planning committee was the development of a judge’s score sheet. Chong-Gum typed up a program for the judges with the lineup of speakers and jepta groups (denoted by church affiliation), but unlike the Bikinian performance at Nuclear Remembrance Day, it provided no other cultural context, lyrical translations, or descriptions of performance choreography. The only song in which lyrics and an English translation were provided was the RMI anthem.

Often, Marshallese appeal to or engage Americans on nationalist terms. The translation of the RMI anthem gave Americans access to an imagined understanding of its meaning—an access via ideological familiarity. But nation and culture, although there is a national culture, cannot be conflated here. The jepta—the main cultural diplomatic gesture—existed almost separately from the RMI anthem, which was performed with a reverent, stoic affect.

The event was advertised through the schools, Facebook, Marshallese churches, and by word of mouth, but the planning committee did not involve the local media.⁵⁷ Chong-Gum hoped her outreach efforts would be achieved by opening the jepta to the American judges and students.⁵⁸ Marshallese elders and pastors, as well as non-Marshallese educators from Springdale, were invited to judge the competition. I was one of the guest judges at the first event. Chong-Gum explained that she researched to see if other jepta competitions had occurred in other states and how they were organized; none had. She also worked with the planning committee to identify what would be appealing to and valued by Americans, in terms of music-centered performances, which usually involve winners and losers. The committee then designed a scoring rubric based on judges’ forms that are typically used in the United States for musical competitions and dance performances. The celebration of Marshallese culture—turned—Americanized competition, for some performers, became more about the competition than community. One of the jepta that did not win in 2013 decided not to perform in the 2014 concert, citing that they were not told of specific requirements beforehand that were on the scorecard, and

according to their leader, the group members thought that they had outperformed the other jeptas.⁵⁹

For the Marshallese judges, the performances were about cultural specificity that the non-Marshallese judges, for the most part, knew nothing about. I was told by a Marshallese elder sitting next to me that my score for one song was too low. “She sings like a bird. Her voice is clear, and that makes it beautiful,” he said. Amazed by the intervention, I wrote his comment down. We Americans were supposed to ask and learn about a culture through a traditionally based performance without having any knowledge or specific instruction as to context or content. To my left sat the American educators (four), and to my right were the Marshallese judges (six). Those on my right watched with confidence, and those on my left looked on with an appreciative confusion.⁶⁰ The Marshallese judges held the sway and the resources. We were given no instructions pertaining to the scorecard (fig. 4).

The event raised a modest amount of money, with no specific number reported by the RMI consulate or the high school. Two scholarships were awarded, which were announced at the 2014 competition, but some members of the Marshallese community feel the scholarship is exclusionary because it is available only to students who graduated from Springdale high schools, thus excluding graduates from schools in neighboring cities. One high school graduate, who now attends NWACC, refused to apply based on his view that this stipulation of exclusion went against Marshallese culture. “There are Marshallese students in other schools,” he said. “They should all be allowed to apply; it’s not *manit* [tradition or way of doing things].”⁶¹

In 2014 the winning jepta group was from the First Marshallese Full Gospel Church (fig. 5). Their performance centered on navigation and showcased the process of building a canoe from selecting the breadfruit tree to tying the knots tightly to sending the canoe off to sea. Marshallese canoe-building and navigational songs, like the Tongan *tau’alo* (paddling songs), are cultural metaphors for coordinated efforts and conviviality, what Marshallese term *ippān doon*, or togetherness.⁶² The synchronized rhythms and dance steps and the call and response (in unison) audibly realize these values, which speak to how Marshallese, as a collective culture, understand freedom in a performative sense.

In contrast to freedom as the power of an individual to exercise her will and as something inherently desirable and positive, Marshallese understand freedom to mean both “liberty” or “to take liberties.” Like many from Oceania, Marshallese view themselves as interdependent and define identity through interconnectedness with others.⁶³ My interlocutors in Springdale define freedom

1st Annual 2013 Marshall Islands Christmas Festival in Northwest Arkansas
 Showcasing **BATTLE OF JEPTA CONCERT** featuring
 Marshallese Dances (biit), Chants (roro), & Choir Singings with no Musical Instruments (al)

SCORE SHEET

Jepta Group: King's Chapel Marshallese Church Judge Name: _____
 Judges will score 1-10 for all categories. 10 being the highest.

CATEGORIES	MAX. PTS.	POINTS	COMMENTS
TIMING	10		
GENERAL APPEARANCE	10		
SINGING BAND – KEYBOARD PLAYER AND SINGERS	10		
MARCH TO BACK OF GYM	10		
MARCHING DANCE	10		
MAIN DANCE (Biit)	10		
CHANTs (Roro)	10		
1st SONG without instruments Playing	10		
2nd SONG without instruments Playing	10		
OVERALL PRESENTATION	10		
TOTAL			

Figure 4.
Judges' scorecard.

in terms of the group, that is, “living in peace with our neighbors,” “working together,” and “maintaining our traditions.”⁶⁴ The morphemes that make up the word *anemkwōj* (*an*: “his soul; her soul; his; her; hers; its”) (*em/im*: “and”) (*kwōj*: “you are”) evince the Marshallese conceptual foundation of freedom, as well as its connotation as *both* good and bad (rather than “neither”) within the performative order of *ippān doon*.



Figure 5.

Jepta members of the Full Gospel Church perform in Springdale, Arkansas. Photo courtesy of April L. Brown.

The group won, according to one of the Marshallese judges, because (1) they “hit all the boxes” within a seven-minute time limit, (2) they fulfilled the motto of 2014 Jemenei

Day by presenting a song and dance about preparing the canoe, (3) their tight coordination reinforced the song’s meaning and also evidenced thorough preparation, and (4) they “sang with their diaphragms” at the highest volume and conveyed emotion through this presentation.⁶⁵ The youth advisers of the Full Gospel Church, those who directed the group, had never directed a jepta in such a competition prior to this. Bale Jemot and Henety Jemot, a young couple in their late twenties, hail from Majuro and moved to Springdale in 2013, having spent the last three years in Maui. A relative who recently moved to Springdale from Majuro shared the song and accompanying movements of the performance, which originated in Majuro. The group performed the song/dance at Christmas in 2013, but because the motto of the 2014 Jemenei Day was so close to their dance, they decided to perform it again for the concert (fig. 6).

Section/ Time	Marshallese Lyrics	English Translation (not literal)	Dance Movement
I. :08 Different clip	Jeik emaktiküt jiron in Butterfield re (5x) Jerekaik ki im ukokoj tok map ne im anwaiki (2x) Repeat 2x	The boys and girls of Butterfield get together. They get together to find a good breadfruit tree, so they can cut it.	Arms swinging at sides, face each other and turn away, hand to face searching, sawing motion.
II. 1:18	Deele im kapene ippäer re meto waj jeje ae ijije (2x) Repeats 2x	They cut the tree, and then they bring it from the land to the ocean and leave it there for eight days.	Cutting motion, then lifting, carrying, pushing the tree down into the water (ocean to soften).
III Different clip	Böktok ulul ne im jekjeke ioon jo Jofoke ilowan wa in, jofoke ikijen wa in Kójero jimor im jelmæ doon im lemlemi	Describes the reason for bringing it back from the ocean to the land: to form/carve the canoe	Carry motion, carving/cutting motion
IV :00	Böktok ulul ne im jekjeke ioon jo Jofoke ilowan wa in, jofoke ikijen wa in Kójero jimor im jelmæ doon im lemlemi	Bringing all the tools so they can carve the canoe out.	Twirling motions
V. :33	Böktok im kólaak tok kie ne im apet ne ion wa in Ddoor tok kat ne ioon wa in	How they put the canoe together.	Picking up motion, then downward thrust motion.
VI. 1:07	Eeoki bwe en pen (4x) inwiwjet lökadimdim bwe en pen (2x)	How they tie the knot and make it tight.	Tying the knot (sail)
VII. 1:35	Böktok im kólaake tok kie ne im apet ne (2x) Enjake bwe en pen (4x) inwiwjet lökadimdim bwe en pen. (3x)	Here they mention the motto of Constitution Day, but they are carrying the other part of canoe.	Carrying motion, triangular motion, then tying motion.
VIII 2:18	Kójeek tok ran wójeke kópo ne im ddoor tok pæ ijooj. (3x) Jekjeke im lemleme, Rojak empaan Rojak kórá, ilele ki (3x) wójá ne (2x)	How they cut the canoe, one of the three parts of the canoe. It is made of different wood. Canoe itself is breadfruit. The pole that anchors the sail is of a harder wood.	Reaching to the floor, lifting motion over heads, slashing motion, threading motion, then pulling toward themselves.
IX 3:08	Kanke tok ton kubaak ne ippäñ kiju Ne im loklokwoje bar lokwoje kokajutake ioon wa in. (3x)	This is how they tie the sail to the bottom part of the canoe to make it tight.	Reaching and pulling towards them, tying motion while crouched on the ground, then lifting up, and pushing forward.
X 3:25	Kólaak tok iep ne ippäñ iep dik ne lumen Wójá ne ioon wa in (3x)	This is similar to 9, what's different is the sail, how they shape it to take wind. They are stretching out the sail to make it into a triangle shape, so that it will catch the wind).	(same as above)
XI. 3:43	Bwilli meto lõk bwillbwilli meto lõk wa in waan Butterfield re Ifñti tok jeje ne ikótaan wa in Natoone im kakiene Wa e waan Butterfield re. Lukkuun mõpaan káñ mõpaan.	This is how they push the canoe into the ocean, and get the paddle to start sailing. They are on the ocean. They see a wave coming. They know the canoe will stay strong but it is put together tightly. They are manly.	Pushing the canoe to the ocean. <i>Chant at 4:20</i> . Flexing muscles show how manly they are.

Figure 6. Chart detailing jepta performance with summary translation in English.

In addition to symbolizing Marshallese “freedom,” the process of remembering how to build a canoe, together, counters the Cold War “violence of forgetting” that accompanied US cultural diplomacy in the islands. Dirk Spennemann, working for the RMI Historic Preservation Office, noted the postwar disappearance of the canoe because of a Marshallese preference for American imports and outboard motors. According to Spennemann, there was an “overall perception that *any* western

development, *any* western goods are intrinsically superior, and by implication, everything traditional is bad or backward, and impending the individual's 'progress.'⁶⁶ A general interest in maintaining traditional canoe-building skills and sailing did not resurface until a few years ago.⁶⁷ Joseph Genz discusses this resurgence and points to the difficulties in preserving cultural knowledge while safeguarding "knowledge-based positions of identity" and deferring to the iroij, who traditionally has power over knowledge transmission.⁶⁸

Because the specialized language of navigation is still known only to a few, literal translation of the jepta lyrics is difficult, and most of the teens who performed the winning jepta were unfamiliar with the words. Thus, while a number of formal, structural, and musical elements of the performance are an adaptation of colonial materials, the content extends beyond the national coherence of "the Marshallese" and promotes a production of knowledge and communication that reaches back three thousand years ago when Austronesians first traveled on large voyaging canoes to the atolls and islands.⁶⁹ The seafaring travelers stayed and braved the harsh environment of the low-lying coral atolls and "[made them habitable] by introducing staple crops such as coconuts, pandanus, breadfruit, taro, and arrowroot and changing the ecology of many of the islands to support these species."⁷⁰ The islanders developed communications patterns that enabled alliances and dependencies between the atoll populations, all of which through the late nineteenth century relied on canoe navigation.⁷¹

For such travel, the Marshallese used unique techniques of celestial and wave pattern navigation and are the only people to have developed a special stick (*mattang* or *wapepe*) chart as a teaching tool prior to the voyages.⁷² This visual depiction of the intersecting waves, mirrored, refracted, reflected, and deflected, was remembered by recitation while the navigators were on their journey. Oceanic mobility allowed for interatoll warfare, or the competition over land, which was ultimately the "competition for statuses which entail power, influence, privilege, and the control of valued resources."⁷³ The system of land tenure, structured around land parcels (*wāto*), framed social organization.

Beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century, American missionaries and German colonial authorities greatly shaped Marshallese society and cultural expressivity, as they experimented with methods of controlling, disciplining, or silencing the indigenous populations. Christian and colonial disciplinary procedures, such as drills, counting, and line dancing, became enconced in the daily routines and cultural lives of Marshallese. The missionaries condemned traditional dress, dance, and *roros* (chants). In 1885 the Marshall

Islands became a German protectorate, and the German colonial government became the first to assume political authority over the indigenous population. Germany, which had recognized *iroojlaplap* Kabua as “King,” also altered social organization through the ban of interatoll warfare.⁷⁴

Jepta’s militaristic elements come from a tradition of competition over land, given the scarcity and customary means of land acquisition (lineage-based warfare) and, through necessity, blended Christianity with elements of traditional warfare that took shape as entertainment for colonial officials. Performance marks precolonial expressivity through some of the dance movements, the *roro*, and Marshallese poetry, and it also resounds a shared history of Oceanic colonial encounters. There are two “marching” components of the jepta: the “marching in” and the “marching dance.” In the Marshall Islands, this is referred to as *maaj* (from “march”), and similar dances with local variations on the name “march” exist throughout Micronesia. It is unclear when Marshallese began performing *maaj*, but there is speculation that it began during the German colonial period. The marching drills and the whistle-blowing maintain a colonial aesthetic and regiment. Call and response was a feature of some precolonial chants. The lyrics are a mix of archaic and contemporary Marshallese. Occasionally, English words and phrases are used. Regional color punctuates the performances, which in the case of Arkansas results in encouraging audience shouts of “yee-haw.”

With all cultural outreach efforts, it is important to assess whether participants found them effective, and if so, why and how. Steven, one of the jepta whistle-blowers from the 2013 contest, shared that he believed that the event helped carry on Marshallese culture and tradition, though he admitted he really did not understand what the movements meant. Though jepta is not a topic discussed among him and his peers at school, some of his Hispanic friends saw him perform on YouTube, and, he said that “they thought it was cool.”⁷⁵

Albious Lator, community leader and Jemenei Day secretary, commented on the importance of “jepta as cultural diplomacy” and exemplification of *jitdam kapeel*:

I think it is a good way to [share] our culture with other cultures. But, I think what is most important is that all the kids in the group know what they are doing. I imagine if we did a survey on all the participants, asking them if they understand what the song and movements mean, about 99% would not know. I think it is important that we teach the performers—the Marshallese who grew up here [Springdale]—the content of the performance and each movement. Yesterday, I called Lester from Full Gospel [Church and 2014 jepta winner], and I asked him if he wanted to speak about his involvement [for this essay]. He said he didn’t know if he could because he “just” blows the whistle. I said, “really?” The younger

generation, like Lester, they need to learn from my generation—whether it is building a canoe, building a house, tying a knot, shoveling, or how to turn on a generator—they need to know how to do these things in real life.⁷⁶

Chong-Gum, who approves of the evolution of *jepta* to incorporate new customs and traditions, added, “Years from now, maybe the *jepta* won’t be about running after the pigs or after the chickens, running after them and trying to kill them in certain ways, but they’ll be performing dances on how they work at Tyson Foods, preparing the chickens in that way. Then Tyson will be in the lyrics.”⁷⁷

Planned to raise scholarships for Marshalllese students to attend college, the Battle of the *Jeptas* event provides the Marshalllese a venue to showcase an important aspect of their traditional culture to Americans. While catering to some aspects of American culture, particularly by inviting American teachers to participate as judges, it also very subtly turns the power dynamic on its head by retaining *jitdam kapeel*, the Marshalllese educational value, through reinforcing the importance of Marshalllese heritage, connections, and communality. Americans are put in a position to judge and provided an Americanized score sheet, but are forced to learn about the culture through asking questions and observing, and thus requires them to seek knowledge in a communal fashion.

Concluding Thoughts

Through these historical connections in this particular place and space, even in the face of various inequalities, the Marshalllese have attempted to have a voice and engage Americans through acts of cultural diplomacy. Cultural diplomacy, as defined by Consul-General Chong-Gum, is a gesture made only when the Marshalllese consulate is involved. However, the term *cultural diplomacy* takes on a more-nuanced, broader understanding when we look through the performative acts of the community and the voices of the community itself. Cultural diplomacy puts pressure on American notions of freedom as obtainable only through American individualism. Marshalllese cultural diplomacy upholds value of Marshalllese ways of being and doing, specifically through *ippān doon*, which relies on presenting these connections within the larger community and invokes a greater sense of history through communal projects whose parameters are defined by the Marshalllese.

These Marshalllese musical modes of diplomacy allow us to recognize certain limitations of the RMI–US Compact of Free Association. Political terms, such as “culture,” “diplomacy,” and “freedom,” when understood cross-culturally,

are not “empty signifiers” but rather ways of learning how to live in the world together. In music and musical performances, Marshallese extend and expand on their cultural understandings of these terms. Therefore, when we take the time to listen to diplomatic efforts as unique cultural productions that are innovative gestures toward negotiating social and political advancements in a specific place (here, Springdale, Arkansas), we can better access the importance of the limits of the Compact.

While both performances are intended to raise awareness and participate in the “entrepreneurial spirit” of Springdale, the Bikinian anthem reminds Americans, through an affective display of sadness, of their mediated exceptionality that is often forgotten as part of US Cold War international relations (and is, at times, reduced to military strategy). The vocal performance of the anthem recalls the violence of nuclear testing and the displaced peoples who are now subject to diabetes and other health issues. The Battle of the *Jeptas* challenges US Cold War cultural diplomacy that devalued Marshallese ways of knowing at the cultural and educational level, by shaping the program toward perceived cultural interests of Americans, all the while retaining the Marshallese values of togetherness, *ippān doon*.

Notes

This essay is the product of many conversations. Some earlier takes on the content were presented at the American Studies Association, the Society for Historians of Foreign Relations, and “Pan-Pacific Musics” and the 2014 Andrew W. Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow Colloquium in the Department of Music at Columbia University, and my warm thanks goes out to those who made these spaces possible and offered insight, including Ana María Ochoa Gautier and Kevin Fellezs. Special thanks goes out to the research, revision, and translation team at MEL: April L. Brown, Albius Latior, Benetick Kabua-Maddison, Terry Takamaru, and Sharlynn Lang. Many thanks go out to Consul-General Carmen Chong-Gum and Faith, Nixon, and Peterson Jibas for their collaborative efforts. I also would like to thank the editors of this special edition, Paul Lyons and Ty Tengan, as well as the journal’s editorial board and an anonymous reader for their helpful comments and direction.

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4. Liping Bu, “Educational Exchange and Cultural Diplomacy in the Cold War,” *Journal of American Studies* 33 (1999): 393.

5. Mary E. Lawson Burke, "Marshall Islands," in *Australia and the Pacific Islands*, vol. 9 of *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music*, ed. Adrienne L. Kaeppler and J. W. Love (New York: Garland, 1998), 749.
6. Jack Niedenthal, Bikini Atoll, December 12, 2008, bikiniatoll.com.
7. See Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon, 1995). See also Lisa Lowe, "The Intimacies of Four Continents," in *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History*, ed. Ann Laura Stoler (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006). For a detailed look at the impact of US nuclear testing, particularly on the people of Rongelap, see Barbara Rose Johnston and Holly Barker, *The Consequential Damages of Nuclear War: The Rongelap Report* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast, 2008).
8. Under the UN trusteeship system, all territories designated as mandates under the League of Nations would be controlled by the original administrator. In the case of the islands of Micronesia, the original administrator was Japan. The United States took over these islands during World War II and, shortly after the war, decided to use the area as its Pacific Proving Grounds for atomic tests. The US government insisted that the TTPI be designated a "strategic trust"—one in which the administering power had a national security interest. This designation meant that the United States would answer only to the UN Security Council, a body in which the United States held a veto power, rather than to the UN General Assembly, which administered all other trust territories.
9. Other sovereign states, such as the Republic of Palau and the Federated States of Micronesia, also have a compact with the United States. Therefore, while these rights apply to all Marshallese, they also apply to citizens of these countries as well.
10. See Johnston and Barker, *Consequential Damages of Nuclear War*, 2008.
11. *United States v. Pink*, 315 U.S. 203, 232 (1942). "As the court of appeals observed, these types of recognition, political, and policy questions are excluded from judicial review" (*Ismael John, et al. v. the United States and People of Bikini, et al. v. the United States*, U.S. 09-498 and 09-499 [2010], 18, December 12, 2008, www.bikiniatoll.com).
12. In 2010 the US Census revealed that 30 percent of the entire Marshallese population (68,000) resides in the United States. In just a decade (2000–2010), the Marshallese population in the United States increased from 6,700 to 22,400, and the trend of out-migration continues.
13. Maria Koinova, "Diasporas and International Politics: Utilizing the Universalistic Creed of Liberalism for Particularistic and Nationalist Purposes," in *Diaspora and Transnationalism: Concepts, Theories and Methods*, ed. Rainer Bauböck and Thomas Faist (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010), 149–66. In addition to a nuclear testing legacy, climate change threatens to erode the lands, and a survival narrative along with a politics of indigeneity has emerged in the Marshall Islands, where extant traditional dances have been performed by men clad in grass skirts, for example, to "fight climate change."
14. Chong-Gum participated in the film. She read through the script and agreed with his suggestions concerning "a new island." It worked well with the theme of navigation and the paradox of isolation/connection.
15. Bordering the Mississippi River on the east, Arkansas's southeastern population historically was more diverse, with a large African American presence. The four-county area of northwest Arkansas, however, was overwhelmingly white. In Washington County, which includes the cities of Springdale and Fayetteville, the white population hovered around 95 percent. Like many southern towns prior to the 1970s, Springdale was considered a "sundown" town, which posted signs that forbade African Americans within city limits after sundown.
16. University of Arkansas, Department of Sociology, NWA Indicators, Chapter 2: Social and Demographic Composition: Growth and Diversity, August 31, 2014, sociology.uark.edu/cf_NWA_INDI-CATORS_CH2_010809a.pdf.
17. The Arkansas legislature officially named Springdale the "Poultry Capital of the World" in April 2013. Sponsored by Sen. John Woods (R-Springdale), the bill was intended to promote the city. See Associated Press, "House OKs Naming Springdale World's Poultry Capital," *Arkansas Democrat Gazette*, April 2, 2013, www.arkansasonline.com/news/2013/apr/02/house-oks-naming-springdale-worlds-poultry-capital/.
18. Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation, *A Profile of Immigrants in Arkansas* (Little Rock, AR: Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation, 2007).

19. US Census Bureau, 2010, www.census.gov; US Census Bureau, Census 2000 Gateway, December 16, 2014, www.census.gov/main/www/cen2000.html; University of Arkansas, Little Rock, Institute for Economic Advancement, Index for Arkansas State and Counties, December 16, 2014, www.aiaa.ualr.edu/arkansas-census-data.html?id=174:index-for-arkansas-state-and-counties&ccatid=1.
20. The White House, One America—Multicultural Center of Northwest Arkansas, September 9, 2014, clinton4.nara.gov/Initiatives/OneAmerica/Practices/pp_19980915.4120.html#background; City of Fayetteville, Access Fayetteville, www.accessfayetteville.org/government/strategic_planning/documents/city_plan_2025/City_Plan_2025_Chapter_3_Demographics.pdf (accessed September 7, 2014).
21. White House, One America; City of Fayetteville, Access Fayetteville.
22. Northwest Arkansas is home to several major corporations whose founders were born in the region. Companies like J. B. Hunt and Jones Trucking Corporation catered to the transportation needs of Tyson and Walmart.
23. League of United Latin American Citizens, NWA Council 754, www.lulacnwa754.org (accessed February 2, 2015).
24. Christie Swanson, “Walmart’s Unique Relationships,” *Springdale Morning News*, May 27, 2012; Jim Yardley, “Vendorville,” *New York Times*, March 8, 1998, *ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1851–2010)*.
25. For more information, see Bethany Moreton, *To Serve God and Wal-Mart: The Making of Christian Free Enterprise* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).
26. See Northwest Arkansas Regional Airport, “History,” www.flyxna.com/about-us/history/ (accessed September 3, 2014).
27. While this article was under editorial review, Tyson Foods announced a \$1 million donation to the Downtown Springdale Alliance, a local nonprofit, to develop infrastructure and green space to help revitalize the city’s “original center of commerce.” See “Tyson Foods Give \$1 Million to Downtown Springdale Alliance,” *Northwest Arkansas Democrat Gazette*, January 23, 2015.
28. *Jumunmej: Republic of the Marshall Islands Social and Economic Report 2005*, Asian Development Bank, 2006, 68. In the RMI Census of 2011, the unemployment rate was cited as 4.7 percent. This figure took into account those who engaged in “home production,” a question added to the latest census but not present earlier. Taking out the “home production” category, the unemployment rate in the RMI would stand at around 39 percent in 2011. See Republic of the Marshall Islands 2011 Census of Population and Housing www.doi.gov/oia/reports/upload/RMI-2011-Census-Summary-Report-on-Population-and-Housing.pdf (accessed January 31, 2015).
29. David Barboza, “Tyson Foods Indicted in Plan to Smuggle Illegal Workers,” *New York Times*, December 20, 2001, www.nytimes.com/2001/12/20/us/tyson-foods-indicted-in-plan-to-smuggle-illegal-workers.html.
30. Ibid.; and Therese Hart, “New Rivals for Compact Money: Guam May Soon Have to Compete with U.S. States,” *Marianas Variety*, May 7, 2008, JKE State Senate District 7, www.kalanienglish.com/news_mvariety_080507.php.
31. According to the Springdale Chamber of Commerce website, the Council for Community and Economic Research’s cost of living index for 2013 placed Springdale at 88.7 percent on a 100 percent scale, which was 11.3 percent below the national average. See Springdale Chamber of Commerce, “Affordability,” springdale.com/business-friendly/facts-figures/affordability/ (accessed January 31, 2015).
32. Empowering Pacific Islander Communities and Asian Americans Advancing Justice, “Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders: A Community of Contrasts” (2014), www.meius.org/why-it-matters/. Figures are based on the Fayetteville Metropolitan Statistical Area (including Springdale). It is widely believed that Marshallese generally underreport in surveys, however, and population figures are higher than in US Census.
33. “Marshall Islands Immigrants in Springdale, Arkansas: Leprosy, VD, TB,” February 8, 2008, 24ahead.com/blog/archives/007464.html.
34. Neda Ulaby, “Profile: Health Officials in Northwest Arkansas Working to Treat Immigrants from the Marshall Islands for Tuberculosis and Other Diseases,” *All Things Considered*, August 9, 2004, EBSCOhost, 0-search.ebscohost.com.library.uark.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nfh&AN=6XN200408092115&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

35. Springdale mayor Doug Sprouse related that overcrowding and the violation of noise ordinances, the latter by Marshalllese churches in commercial zones, were major problems (interview by author, Springdale, July 15, 2013 and Carmen Chong-Gum, interview by author, Springdale, December 12, 2014).
36. April Brown, e-mail message to author of conversation with Debbie Miller (former *Arkansas Democrat Gazette* reporter), August 8, 2014.
37. Laurence Marshall Carucci, "You'll Always Be Family: Formulating Marshalllese Identities in Kona, Hawai'i," in "Pacific Islands Diaspora, Identity, and Incorporation," special issue, *Pacific Studies* 35 (April–August 2012): 206. In the same special issue, Suzanne Fallgout described a similar pattern of stigmatization and insularity among the Pohnepeian diasporic community in Hawai'i in "Pohnepeians in Hawai'i: Refashioning Identity in Diaspora," 184–202.
38. April Brown, e-mail message to author, December 30, 2014, of conversations between Albious Lator, Faith Jibas, and Brown. Lator and Jibas shared firsthand experiences of family members admitted to a particular Springdale hospital for seemingly non-life-threatening illnesses, who died. The two also described how they felt that the medical staff was condescending and behaved inappropriately in interaction with family members who did not speak English. The two also described how word had spread among other Marshalllese to seek medical care elsewhere.
39. For a detailed look at Project 4.1, see Johnston and Barker, *Consequential Damages*.
40. See Hau'ofa, "Our Sea of Islands," 7; John Connell, "Samoan Worlds: Culture, Migration, Identity, and Albert Wendt," in *Writing across Worlds: Literature and Migration*, ed. Russell King, John Connell, and Paul White (New York: Routledge, 1995), 263–80; Connell, "A False Global-Local Duality? Migration, Markets and Meanings," in *Pacific Rim Development: Integration and Globalization in the Asia-Pacific Economy*, ed. Peter J. Rimmer (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1997), 197–221; Sal'iliemanu Lilomaiva-Doktor, "Beyond 'Migration': Samoan Population Movement (Malaga) and the Geography of Social Space (Vā)," *Contemporary Pacific* 21.1 (2009): 1–32; Teaiwa, "On Analogies," 71–87; Raymond Young, "Pathways as Metaphors of Movement: A Study of Place, Mobility, and Embodiment in Fiji" (PhD diss., Victoria University of Wellington, 1998).
41. Jack Niedenthal, *For the Good of Mankind: A History of the People of Bikini and Their Islands*, 2nd ed. (Majuro, Republic of the Marshall Islands: Bravo, 2013), 108–9.
42. A large number of Bikinians also reside in Enid, Oklahoma, a city about 220 miles west of Springdale.
43. Nixon Jibas, interview by author, Springfield, MO, June 3, 2013.
44. Hinton Johnson, interview by author, Majuro, Republic of the Marshall Islands, November 2009.
45. April Brown, pers. comm., March 2, 2013.
46. Nixon Jibas, interview by author, Springfield, MO, June 3, 2013.
47. Ibid.
48. Dave Perozek, "Testing Impact Still Echoing: Thermonuclear Detonation Shapes Marshalllese Lyrics," *Benton County Daily Record*, March 1, 2013.
49. "Marshalllese Atomic Songs," *Ozarks at Large*, KUAJ, Fayetteville, AR, NPR affiliate, June 10, 2013.
50. MEI was cofounded in July 2013 by April Brown and the author. Faith Jibas sits on the MEI Board of Directors. See the MEI website at www.meius.org.
51. The US government, in Section 177 of the Compact, defined only four atolls as eligible for nuclear compensation (Bikini, Rongelap, Enewetak, and Utrik) for damages incurred during the nuclear testing period, despite the fact that fallout contaminated multiple atolls and their inhabitants. See "Atolls upon Which Significant Nuclear Fallout Could Have Occurred from the Pacific Proving Grounds during Atmospheric Testing," Embassy of the Republic of the Marshall Islands Document Collection, Washington, DC.
52. The event title was written on the scorecard for judges of the Battle of Jeptas.
53. Laurence Marshall Carucci, *Nuclear Nativity: Rituals of Renewal Empowerment in the Marshall Islands* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1997). Carucci writes on the Ujelang and Enewetak festivities.
54. Randy, interview by author, Ejit Island, Majuro Atoll, Republic of the Marshall Islands, November 16, 2009.
55. When I was in the Marshall Islands, I noticed teenagers wearing *jitdam kapeel* shirts and learned it was the motto of the College of the Marshall Islands.
56. See James Clifford, *Returns: Becoming Indigenous in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

57. Though there is a local Springdale newspaper, I have heard several Marshallese note that there is no Marshallese newspaper in which to communicate with the (Marshallese) community.
58. Chong-Gum, interview.
59. Steven Harris, interview by author, Fayetteville, AR, September 9, 2014.
60. Layne Bass, a teacher at Springdale High School, remarked that one student who led a jepta was usually “silly and off-task in the classroom, but was more focused and mature as he led his group” (e-mail correspondence of a Facebook conversation between April Brown and Bass, September 3, 2014).
61. Benetick Jubadabad Kabua Maddison, interview by author, Springdale, AR, August 22, 2014.
62. Adrienne L. Kaeppler, “Tau’a’alo: Paddling Songs as Cultural Metaphor,” in *Austronesian Soundscapes: Performing Arts in Oceania and Southeast Asia*, ed. Birgit Abels (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011), 223–40.
63. AnnaMarie Christiansen, “Cultural Hybridity, Gender, and Identity: A Pacific Islander Woman in the Academy,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 21.3 (2000): 189. Christiansen cites an interview with the Tongan scholar Konai Helu-Thaman, who defined a Pacific Islander as embodying “a collective cultural identity which characterizes many Pacific societies as opposed to the individualistic ones that are more typical of European societies.” In “Not Just Another Word: Definitions of ‘Freedom’ Vary,” *Pacific Standard*, July 2, 2009, Tom Jacobs references a psychological study done to test reactance theory among collectivistic versus individualistic cultures.
64. Mona Maddison and Benetick Jubadabad Kabua Maddison, e-mail message to author, February 2, 2014. Albious Latior, a Marshallese community leader in Springdale, described the Marshallese conceptualization of freedom in terms of land. “In the Marshall Islands your land rights is your freedom. The U.S. is the land of opportunity, but your freedom is limited. There are a lot of rules to follow . . . freedom is ‘this is your land and yours to use however you want’” (Albious Latior, interview by Terry Takamaru, July 3, 2014, Marshallese Oral History Project, Marshallese Educational Initiative, www.meius.org).
65. Adelbert Laukon and Neisen Laukon, interview by author, Springdale, AR, May 23, 2014.
66. Dirk H. R. Spennemann, *Ennaanin Eto: A Collection of Essays on the Marshallese Past* (Majuro Atoll, RMI: Republic of the Marshall Islands Ministry of Internal Affairs Historic Preservation Office, 1993), 81.
67. Waan Aelōn in Majel (WAM) is a nonprofit organization based in Majuro that teaches youths the skills of traditional Marshallese canoe building. Led by Alson Kelen, WAM received a \$31,000 grant from the US embassy in 2014 for cultural preservation (“Waan Aelōn in Majel receives the Ambassador’s Cultural Preservation Award,” Embassy of the United States, Embassy News, September 9, 2014, majuro.usembassy.gov/wam-award.html).
68. Joseph Genz, “Navigating the Revival of Voyaging in the Marshall Islands: Predicaments of Preservation and Possibilities of Collaboration,” *Contemporary Pacific* 23.1 (2011): 1–34.
69. Austronesians refer to people with Austronesian descent who make up the dominant ethnic group in Micronesia, Melanesia, Polynesia, Maritime Southeast Asia, and Madagascar.
70. Peter Rudiak-Gould, “The Fallen Palm: Climate Change and Culture Change in the Marshall Islands” (master’s thesis, Oxford University, 2009), 9.
71. Dirk H. R. Spennemann, “Traditional and Nineteenth Century Communication Patterns in the Marshall Islands,” *Micronesian: Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences* 4.1 (2005): 25–51.
72. Dirk H. R. Spennemann, *Ennaanin Eto: A Collection of Essays on the Marshallese Past* (Majuro, RMI: Historic Preservation Office, 1993), 84.
73. Robert C. Kiste, “The Relocation of the Bikini Marshallese,” in *Exiles and Migrants in Oceania*, ed. Michael D. Lieber (Honolulu: University Press of Hawai’i, 1977), 82.
74. For more information on the colonial history as well as chiefly lineages, see Julianne M. Walsh, “Imagining the Marshalls: Chiefs, Tradition, and the State on the Fringes of U.S. Empire” (PhD diss., University of Hawai’i, 2003).
75. Harris, interview.
76. Albious Latior and April Brown, pers. comm., September 7, 2014.
77. Carmen Chong-Gum and April Brown interview, Springdale, AR, August 22, 2014.