terms of use, materials, technology, and symbolism?

Pointing to gaps such as these is, in large part, simply quibbling. Before *Home in the Islands*, relatively little was known about housing in the Pacific. Now that this fine volume and its contributions are available to stimulate question and thought, it is easy to see just how much more is needed, and how to fill the gaps.

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Few ethnographies measure up to the charge set by Clifford Geertz to provide a truly “thick description.” Carucci’s discussion on Marshallese ritual, however, commendably achieves the kind of ethnographic thoroughness I believe Geertz advocated. Carucci does more than let us merely peer through a crack into the cultural world of the Marshall Islanders; he throws the door wide open so we may come in to gain a full view. He richly describes Marshallese culture and social practices, extensively connects ritual to social life and meaning, and interweaves descriptions with theory for consideration rather than fixing interpretive outcomes.

In this book Carucci, an anthropologist at the University of Montana who has worked in the Marshall Islands over a period of twenty years and published extensively on Marshallese culture, describes how the Islanders of Åne-wetak Atoll make sense of their history by drawing on the representational resources that have deep historical meaning. In recent history many global dramas have been played out on these Islanders’ atoll: World War Two battles, military occupation, relocation to Wújlan for atomic bomb testing. Carucci, however, does not attempt to detail this imperial history, nor does he wish to be overly occupied by the reality of the social and economic conditions of the Islanders. Instead, he concentrates on how the Islanders think through a “verified past for purposes of historical reference and current empowerment” by symbolically constructing “an indigenous history” and a “historically significant existence” derived from mythology, Christianity, and kinship. This meaningful existence is represented and reconstituted through ritual practice. He identifies the annual three-month celebration called *Kuirmõj* (Christmas) as the interactional and performance context in which significant physical and symbolic capital (both “pagan” and Christian metaphors) is invested to draw on the life-giving forces of deities and thus perpetuate and ensure a meaningful existence for the Islanders. This unified cosmology is “lived in” daily and maintained through ritual enactments.

Through the course of the celebration competing songfest groups called *jepta* engage in several activities such as recruitment, song competitions, dis-
plays of food, ritual games that invert
gender relations as well as authority,
age and kinship relations, dances,
buffoonery, costuming, and heightened
cataclysmic events. Nothing goes
beyond the purview of Carucci’s
description or lacks importance in the
interpretation of the logic of this cele-
bration and its meaning. He addresses
language, land tenure, food prepara-
tion, gender, sexuality, authority, age,
economics, international relations,
spatial concepts, myths about the
primal gods and the trickster figure
with his connection to atomic bomb
testing, and a discussion on the sym-
bulic condensation of the life-giving
deity Jebro with Christ.

Carucci argues that within the cele-
bration, exchanges between the jepta,
and between humans and deities, blur
the boundaries of heaven and earth,
the sacred and the profane, and so
forth. Carucci proposes that a single
jepta internally operates as a metonym
of the bwij (which he describes as a
bilateral extended family), because like
the bwij, the jepta is governed by the
principles of sharing, equality, kind-
ness, and feelings of indebtedness. The
logic of the bwij is expansive, inclu-
sive, and flexible to incorporate a
variety of identifiable kin into relation-
ships of obligation. Alternatively, while
jepta groups are formed around an
ideology of cooperative kin for the
purpose of recruitment, they also func-
tion as a metonym for competing
groups like the jowi, or clans that
follow female lines. Consequently, as a
metonym of jowi, various jepta engage
in transactions that enact historically
salient metaphorical battles and mar-
riage exchanges. The entire celebration
must ultimately be seen as an exchange
between humans and deities; the ritual
is offered not as a supplication, but to
obligate the gods to reciprocate by
renewing nature and regenerating
humankind for the coming year. The
logic of how the Islanders “expand the
map of their own episteme” draws
from and adds to their identities.

I believe Carucci correctly asserts
that the logic of exchange within the
bwij and between jowi informs and
shapes the ritual and its jepta. Non-
theless, his concept of bwij reflects the
particular history of Ane-wetak more
than how the logic of bwij is realized
in the rest of the Marshall Islands. He
declines to call bwij a matrilineage
because such a term reflects an African
model he feels does not resonate with
Pacific kinship. His disinclination to a
comparative model is less problematic
than how, in the broader Marshallese
cultural context, the concept of bwij is
clearly rooted in a female principle of
linearity (with all its metaphors, such
as bwij as the root term for navel).
Whereas Carucci asserts that inclusiv-
ness denies linearity in favor of a bilat-
eral principle, I think Islander practice
is more a matter of how the Islanders’
concept of the female line and its meta-
phors of sharing, kindness, and equal-
ity reach out to incorporate others.
Linearity and horizontal inclusion are
not antithetical but work together.
This alternative view of bwij would
only strengthen Carucci’s argument.
Indeed, both the logic of exchange and
the cosmological relations of humans
to deity embodied in the guiding
mythology (which he presents) draw
from the “female as mother” concept
and a lineal principle, and thus are
linked to the regenerative ideology of the ritual.

Generally I feel Carucci is ethno-graphically right, but at times he seems too right as he neatly fits together all the pieces of the ritual and cultural life of the Marshall Islanders. In an attempt to cast widely the ethno-graphic gaze, one wonders if this method does not obligate the ethnographer to fit all the pieces of culture and history into a tidy integrative system of meanings and social practices. Part of the vibrancy of culture lies in how, from one context to the next, social actors generate meanings that are multiple and flexible. Carucci does show how meanings shift and, as emergent products, are produced and reproduced through time. However, the slippage between the sense-making of the ethnographer and the “native’s” sense, no matter how informed by intersubjective understandings, cautions that disparate activities and symbols may not always refer back to a semiotic center. Nonetheless, to see the “order of things” from the Islanders’ perspective Carucci has been more than thorough and insightful. He has presented a reading that brings closer the experience and worldview of the Marshall Islanders.

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The gauntlet was thrown by Gregory Bateson, who termed the Baining “unstudiable,” a challenge confirmed forty years later by Jeremy Pool, who considered himself to have discovered no “area of central anthropological concern” that could be fruitfully explored among the Baining. Jane Fajans accepted this challenge. In the process of over two years of cumulative fieldwork in the late seventies and early nineties, she discovered first, that her method of study had to rely on observation and participation much more heavily than informants’ exegesis, and second, that anthropological analysis of Baining culture would have to emphasize process and interaction rather than form and structure. Fajans is scrupulous about informing readers of her own interpretative process and the bases for her analysis. Interestingly enough, she tells us that rather than having the main symbolic elements of Baining culture lavishly displayed in ritual sequences and later confirmed or enriched through the study of daily life, as many ethnographers seem to do, among the Baining it was necessary to fully understand the values and actions that informed daily life and most of all the socialization process before she could make any headway on understanding the fantastic and