

From Islands to Atoll:

Relating Reefs of History at Kwajalein

Greg Dvorak

1. Atollism

Islands of starvation, islands of abundance, islands of connectedness: the nearly one hundred flat coral islets that form Kwajalein in the Marshall Islands, the largest atoll on earth, are a gigantic ring on the water, strung together by a dynamic reef. The lagoon it encloses—indeed the entire atoll—is a microcosm of Oceania, a metaphor for the contradictory and interconnected histories of the contemporary world.

I choose Kwajalein to explore the idea of “encounter” not only because it was the site of a major battle of the Pacific War and a place of unfathomable change throughout the twentieth century between Marshall Islanders, Japanese, and Americans; I focus on Kwajalein also because it was my childhood hometown, where I spent the first decade of my life. Because the main island of the atoll is leased to the US Army as a missile-testing base, my early years in American suburbia there provided my first taste of the ways in which huge nations and small localities intersect. Haunted by the ghosts of Japanese soldiers and the lullabies of our Marshallese housekeeper, I knew that this atoll had been home to many others before me, yet I felt linked to those other people through the common idea of home, and through the genealogy of the atoll itself.

Coral colonizes: Polyps voyage in the ocean currents, joining with other coral communities atop subaquatic volcanoes that rise miles from the sea floor to break the surface. Their migrations are based on the flows of the sea, and their settlements are serendipitous. They join with previous settlers, bringing their own histories to the reef, reterritorializing and adapting, forming a complex genealogy that connects islands and forms new ones, reshaping and making sense of the endless blue of ocean.

Like coral, people came to this reef called Kwajalein, riding flows, swells, and serendipity. The people who came long ago in canoes settled on the broadest and most plentiful of these islands, becoming the Ri-Kuwajleen (the Kwajalein people) of the islands now known as the Marshall Islands. Other ocean “currents” such as trade, science

Romanticism, adventure, and Christianity brought other travelers across this reef from Europe and North America, and later from Japan. The tide of militarization and empire washed across the Pacific in the twentieth century and brought other waves of soldiers, civil servants, and engineers like my father.

Kwajalein's reef is encoded with tens of thousands of years of geologic activity in deep time, followed by thousands of years of voyaging, conquest and settlement, wars and disputes. Outrigger canoes, adzes, and mats from other islands close by and further south such as Kiribati or further west such as Kosrae and Chuuk found their way to this reef over time. Layer by layer, new islands formed, while others washed away. In recent centuries, the concrete of Spanish missions has crumbled into the sea with the German cisterns, now overgrown with flamboyant coral—spongy, brittle, or pinnacled. Japanese ships like the *Shōei* or *Asakaze Maru* nestle upside down, entangled with American Budweiser cans.

In conventional histories, we are not taught to think much of the journeys and transformations of individuals. Rather we learn of the victories and losses of nations and the seeming “inevitability” of victimhood and marginalization at the hands of powerful global forces. In their quest to possess the Central Pacific, both Japan and the United States in the last century physically shaped Kwajalein Atoll into a military stepping-stone between the two countries. In the late 1930s, Japanese battalions of *setsuei-butai* construction workers,¹ mostly Korean laborers and Marshallese (Fukushige 1987, 39), used dynamite to break enormous holes in the reef around the main islets of Kwajalein. These reef rocks were used to build seawalls, buildings, and the first runway, still the main island's most prominent feature. Beginning in the 1950s, earth was moved and shifted again by US forces, who blasted even larger holes in the reef, dredged away entire sacred coral heads,² and expanded the contours of different islands.

This traumatic reshaping of the reef and rewriting of land corresponds to the ways in which collective American war memories have oversimplified the atoll's complexity. The history of the US invasion and “liberation” from Japanese forces in 1944 has become the official story of what “really” happened. It is a story that effectively inscribes Kwajalein as a “perpetual battlefield” (Carucci 1989, 73), later justifying the extensive

testing of unprecedented nuclear weaponry and the eventual present-day use of Kwajalein Island for military purposes.

In contrast to the flows of real human bodies in real physical space, these waves of national discourse have a way of obscuring the true coral reef-like connections between people and place. The American victory narrative articulates Kwajalein with the United States and memorializes the land as intrinsically American, simultaneously obscuring the stories of Marshall Islanders, Japanese, and Koreans, as well as other Islanders and nonmilitary Americans. As Vicente Diaz has described in the context of Guam (2001), the compelling story of “liberation” has done more to reinforce US hegemony than anything else.

What I would like to propose, however, is that there is another history that settles and grows solid like coral does within the reef of an atoll. Beyond the glorious narratives of nation lie the stories of people who find themselves linked to one another implicitly through place and deal with those consequences in different ways. Like the submerged reefs between islands, their connections are not always visible, but they exist nonetheless.

The “atollistic” worldview I am imagining here is an expansion of Epeli Hau’ofa’s treatise, “Our Sea of Islands” (1993), a manifesto that stresses the flows between Islanders via the connectivity of the sea itself, and that points out the resourcefulness of inter-Oceanic networks of communication, culture, and exchange linking islands and also spanning the world through diaspora. Katerina Teaiwa has since emphasized the importance of genealogies and the ways in which all Islanders are deeply united across Oceania through traceable ties that transcend national and colonial boundaries (2005).

“Atollism” not only accounts for the flows and interconnections between Islanders, in the literal sense, but also takes into consideration the broader relationships of people to place, and the transformations and linkages that happen through migration and settlement. While Europeans and Asians may have settled in Oceania in recent centuries for any number of reasons, it is significant that they have indeed started new lives in these places, initiated their own relationships to the local context, and symbolically participated, like coral, in the creation of the reef. Many settlers have found a sense of home in Oceania, which they carry with them even if they return to their place of origin.

Thus it is largely through the mediation of these outsiders that places like Kwajalein have been intertwined into the histories of other localities—through copra traders to Hanover, Germany; through navy sailors to Aichi, Japan; or through missile testers to Huntsville, Alabama.

I do not write this to condone colonialism, by any means. Nor do I intend to disregard the immense power discrepancies that have led to the abuse and dislocation of people from their own land. Rather, in imagining the bigger atoll, I am attempting instead to draw attention to the actual participants in the drama of history and to show how they are personally implicated and involved in the larger network of the reef, which is often at odds with the mandates of their “mission.” Many Japanese or German traders married into local families and stayed in the Marshall Islands in the early 1900s; many Japanese families come back again and again to mourn the loss of fallen soldiers; many American children who grew up on Kwajalein continue to return and reconnect with “home.”

In my own return to the Marshall Islands to conduct doctoral research, I was challenged by the words of the *Iroojlaplap* (paramount chief) of Kwajalein. When I introduced myself to him and told him that although I had grown up on Kwajalein and felt like it was my home, I knew it was not really my home and I was not indigenous, he stopped me in mid-sentence, saying, “If you love Kwajalein and you feel like that place is your home, and you spent your childhood here, then I say it is your home and you do belong here. These islands don’t belong to anyone. We belong to them. . . . You’ve got a piece of Kwajalein in you, and that’s why you keep coming back. You’ve got to do something for this place.”³ Ever since this invitation to belong to the atoll, I have begun to see myself less as an estranged colonizer than as someone who has a real responsibility and role in its history.

Kwajalein’s name was likely adapted from a European mispronunciation of *rukjanleen*, “the people who gather or harvest the fruits of the place known as Kwajalein” (Carucci 1997, 49). The far western edge of Kwajalein islet was home to a legendary *utilomar* flowering tree that bore precious flowers,⁴ and the sea around that area was the source of enough flying fish to feed all of the Marshall Islands (Langkio and Sam 2005). It was the dream of many to come and pluck these flowers, and this explains why the atoll was so popular with Spanish, Germans, Japanese, and Americans. “Everyone wants

to get a piece of Kwajalein,” said Ato Langkio and Kirong Sam, both respected Kwajalein Atoll elders who are very knowledgeable about old stories and the prewar period; “the whole world is being blessed—because Kwajalein gives the world peace” (Langkio and Sam 2005).

It is this inclusive and rather optimistic definition of encounter—the genealogy of coral and its many reefs—on which I would like to meditate, to dislocate the ongoing conversation about indigenous/nonindigenous and the false binary this creates. I am writing here not to delineate who is indigenous and who is a colonizer, but rather to consider the possibility that there is a true difference between actual people and the “currents” on which they journey, and that, regardless of how cruel, contradictory, or accidental, these migrations have sedimented layer on layer and formed real meanings, emplaced and embodied.

The late Hokari Minoru, in his groundbreaking book *Radical Oral History* (2004), contemplated the possibility of a cross-cultural history that does not involve nationalistic state histories vis-à-vis “indigenous peoples,” but rather one that takes into consideration the mutuality and interconnectedness of the conversations happening between groups of people at the local level. In his work with the Gujirindi people of Northern Territory Australia, Hokari told a history in which he personally participated by linking the space and time of local Japan to that of the local Australian outback. “Local history is a fragment which supposes its implicit all-ness. This fragment gestures toward the complexity and multiplicity of everything without threatening that totality itself” (Hokari 2004, 215).⁵

Like Hokari, in the model of the atoll I imagine integrity, rather than isolation and irrelevance, in the local. The orality of personal memory, indeed “oral history,” is one in which the speaker “relates” seemingly disparate ideas together. Relating, articulating, and narrating are always about simultaneously telling and linking. Yet there is a big difference between the kinds of articulations made locally and the meta-narratives deployed by nations in order to justify power and conquest. As in Kwajalein, too often such local histories, and their fragmentary but metonymic “all-ness” (as suggested by Hokari), are marginalized by the violence of colonial and state histories that privilege the

convenient collective memories of Empire over the perceived messiness of local stories and individual memories.

Those who have eaten the fruits of the Kwajalein tree are in some way transformed by the experience and linked together through the common heritage of home and place. In the stories that follow I explore the lives of a few people for whom Kwajalein is in some way home. In their own relating of their own experiences, it will become clear just how much each person belongs to the same continuum and how they are in fact related to one another despite the tensions and contradictions of US hegemonic power.



Photo 1. Young Ebeye residents swim at low tide with the radars of Kwajalein across the reef in the background. Photo by Greg Dvorak.

2. Raymond

He sits patiently on a bench beside the dock security checkpoint on the islet of Kwajalein, his arms folded. Beside him is a five-gallon, yellow plastic water cooler.

“I am waiting for my wife, like always,” he explains. “She works as a maid here, and so she gets off work an hour after I do. I know she’s tired, so I like to help her carry all our stuff back home.” He pauses and waits silently for a gym-pumped Kwajalein policeman in a white polo shirt, black shorts, and black sneakers to stroll past us.

“They don’t let us stay on this island any later than an hour after work anymore. They say it’s for security reasons,” he says under his breath. “But for some reason, they let us on the island sometimes two, three hours before work, while it’s still dark out and all the Americans on this island are still sleeping. I don’t understand. . . . They treat us Marshallese like terrorists in our own country, even when Marshallese are fighting in the US Army in Iraq.”⁶ Raymond chuckles dryly, pretending it’s funny, and looks at his watch.

“Well, it looks like she’s late today, and I am gonna get in trouble if I wait out here any longer,” he says, hoisting up a large bag of ice cubes over his shoulder and pointing to the cooler beside him. “Can you carry this?” he asks. “Let’s go through security and wait on the outside of the dock.”

The dock security checkpoint on Kwajalein is not quite like it used to be when I was a little boy growing up here in the 1970s. That was before the Marshallese landowners of Kwajalein Atoll began their peaceful demonstrations for fair compensation for their land (Johnson 1982). Now, as we walk through the checkpoint, our badges are inspected and our bags are run through an x-ray machine and tested for explosives. One of the guards takes my badge until I return to Kwajalein, and says with a wink, “Have a great time on Ebeye, dude.” Two police dogs sniff angrily at our legs. Raymond jokes to me, “You’d better not be trying to feed those dogs any T-bone steaks from your bag, alright? You know the police will confiscate them!” I don’t have any food in my bags, but he is not joking about the confiscations: The base at Kwajalein forbids the transfer of most retail food items beyond its borders. More specifically, the authorities are constantly trying to prevent the American community’s subsidized fresh food from being smuggled to Ebeye and other Marshallese communities. Despite the fact that, as in any small town, most people know each other on a first-name basis, minor infractions are taken very seriously.

“First it was the food, and now the water,” says Raymond. “Our water desalinization plant over on Ebeye keeps breaking down, and so no one wants to drink that salty stuff. It makes you sick. The Marshallese government and the Kwajalein Atoll landowners can’t agree on anything and so we end up with bad water and sometimes no power, and then the base doesn’t even let us drink their water. They used to let anyone

come and fill up a cooler with water, but then they put the tap on the inside of the fence to make sure only badged workers get to drink it. That's why there are all these kids gathered around here at the dock—they're hoping someone will give them drinkable water to take back to their families who don't have jobs here." All around us in the ferry waiting area are teenage boys, watching the basketball game that flickers on the wall-mounted TV sets. They all carry empty buckets, coolers, and plastic bottles, eager to catch the eye of a Marshallese badged worker who can sneak back through security to fill up their tanks with a day's supply of water.

"It's sad to see those water boys" he sighs, "but we're not supposed to fill up water for them. Some of us do, but you can get in trouble. Yesterday there was a guy in front of me who had gone back out to fill up one kid's bucket, and when he came back through security the policewoman there recognized him and told him to dump it all out or get fined. I thought to myself, if she's going to make him dump out all that precious water in the first place, what's the point?"

Soon Lora, Raymond's wife, comes through the metal detector and joins us, just in time to catch the six o'clock boat. She holds a huge plastic bag full of clean laundry that she did while housekeeping for an American family on Kwajalein. Together the three of us hop on the ferry as it pushes away from the harbor.

The ferry that runs the short distance between Kwajalein and Ebeye is really a military landing craft, reequipped with long benches inside and a canvas canopy to keep dry. Workers—everyone from supermarket clerks to mechanics, airport baggage handlers to nannies—cram the benches and the stairwell, talking story, listening to music through headphones, watching the sun set on the horizon. Scattered among them are some of the Marshallese schoolchildren chosen to study with the Americans at Kwajalein, who sit together with their bulging book bags and compare answers to their math homework. In stark contrast to these children, the water boys perch proudly on the upper deck with their freshly filled tanks, leaning into the wind.

Raymond gestures to the horizon. "My island's out there. You can almost see it from here, on the West Reef. We own that whole island. It's a part of this atoll, just one of the small islands, but it's in the Mid-Atoll Corridor, where the missiles come down. So back in the 1950s, when I was a small boy, the US made us leave our islands and come to

Ebeye. They even promised us all jobs on Kwajalein to make us go. It never really happened that way, and still we can't go back to live there.

“Ooh, but it was a good island, really nice, really small. There were plenty of families there, but we were like one big family, so we used to all pray together and eat in the same cookhouse and tell stories until late at night. It was so quiet and nice. You could catch coconut crabs everywhere, and giant clams out on the reef, and eat breadfruit and pandanus. Imagine how that was—we had all the food we ever wanted. So friendly, so safe. Now I see these kids walking around Ebeye asking for handouts. They don't even know how to climb a coconut tree.”

On Ebeye, Raymond and his wife hail a taxi, a red pickup truck with the word “Yokwe”—Love—written on its rear window. We all jump in the back with the cooler, laundry, and bag of ice cubes. “The kids really like it when we bring these back from Kwaj,” he says. “They put it in their cola.”

The pickup truck rumbles through the crowded streets of Ebeye at twilight. Children run in all directions, some playfully throwing rocks as we roll by. We pass the waste-treatment plant and approach the dump. The air is pungent with the smell of car exhaust and an occasional waft of sewage. “You're lucky—today the wind is blowing in the other direction,” Raymond points out, and Lora covers her mouth as she laughs.

We walk through rows and rows of dilapidated plywood bungalows, interspersed with aluminum trailer houses with broken windows and doors falling off hinges—recycled housing from the US base. Nearby, smoke billows out of the mounds of trash in the landfill area. People call this area of Ebeye “Dumptown.” Raymond unlocks a heavy padlock on a flimsy door and jiggles the door open. “Home sweet home,” he says, as we enter a hot, dimly lit room with no windows. This, he explains, is emergency housing erected by FEMA in the 1980s after a major typhoon devastated the island. Raymond's family still lives there. Inside, the walls are adorned with children's artwork, an embroidered illustration of Jesus and the Last Supper, family photographs, and other memorabilia.



Photo 2. Plywood housing along the lagoon at Ebeye. Photo by Greg Dvorak.

“Actually, no *ribelle* has ever come in here. You’re the first one. Those Americans don’t come over to Ebeye people’s houses most of the time, you know,” Raymond tells me.

Lora reclines on their bed after a long day of work, and Raymond massages his wife’s tired feet. Two of their sons come in from outside and sit quietly beside me as their father talks.

On the wall is a tattered, color copy of a sepia photograph of several Japanese men in white suits. One man holds a baby.

“My wife’s grandfather, he was Japanese, a businessman. That makes her a quarter Japanese. *Kon-nichiwa!*” he salutes and bows dutifully to her with a grimace on his face.

Lora interjects, “I heard he was a really nice man. Back in those days, my parents told me when Japanese were in the Marshall Islands, people got along with each other. They traded things with each other, they talked each other’s languages. They had kids together.”

“It’s kinda like now, but really different. Americans are welcome here, and we like them and have lots of friends,” Raymond nods at me, “and we’re good neighbors, but it’s not the same. It’s like they don’t realize how we’re all part of the same place. There was a big war here, and horrible things happen in wars, but a lot of people around here also don’t think the Americans really set us free. They just came and did all this testing and put the radiation here. And maybe we’re an independent country now, but oh, not Kwajalein. We do all the work for the Americans on Kwajalein, and we just make them look good every day. Like good hosts, we give them their space and they are welcome—all we ask is they respect us, and our right to belong here, too.

“One thing I can say is I never understand why the Americans and the Japanese and all these people wanted Kwajalein so much,” he jokes. “These islands are just low and flat—who would want to come live here? They’re low and simple like us Marshallese people.” He smiles skeptically and Lora slaps him on the back—“*Wuk-kuk!*” she laughs, “Raymond’s so simple that he can’t keep his mouth shut!”

“I love Kwajalein Atoll so much,” Raymond continues. “This place is my home, my God-given place. One of these days I’m gonna go back to my small island. And if the US doesn’t give us a better land payment deal by 2016, some of the landowners here say we should go back there for sure. But even then, is our government gonna fix Ebeye? Anyway, I don’t care about my job on Kwajalein anymore—I just care about my people.

“Yeah, of course I’m gonna be fine if I go back to my small island, and those other Marshallese from other places, they can go back to theirs. I know how to live out there. It was bound to happen some day. I’m gonna teach my sons how to make their own canoes, how to hunt for reef fish. We’ll go home for once and for all,” he announces proudly, crossing his arms. The boys giggle and nod as their father talks, with smirks of disbelief on their faces. Raymond wads up a piece of notepaper and hits his eldest son in the shoulder—“I’m serious!” He turns to me and smiles widely, “and you’re gonna be welcome, like always!”

3. *Dan*

I ride back around ten o’clock, the monotonous drone of the military ferry’s engines and the nauseating stench of diesel choking out the fresh, gentle breezes of a full-moon

evening. There are almost no other passengers on board, except for a middle-aged Marshallese woman stretched out on a bench fanning herself and a white man with a baseball cap, tipsy from his evening escapades on Ebeye. When we reach Kwaj, the woman slouches down on a bench outside the security checkpoint, perhaps to wait for the start of a midnight work shift. The American man stumbles back into the base, and I follow him. The night guard returns our badges to us as we walk onto the quiet island.

Unlike Ebeye, Kwaj is completely quiet, except for the hum of all the air-conditioning and the distant thundering of the waves on the ocean side. Most people are asleep by now, but on my way back to where I am staying, I see a group of people waving at me. They are seated in lounge chairs in someone's backyard, with tiki torches, a piñata strung between two palm trees, and pink flamingoes planted in the ground around them. Duran Duran's "Ordinary World" plays in the background from an iPod. "Wanna margarita?" my friend Lisa calls out.

It is a Cinco de Mayo party, hence the Mexican theme. I join a circle of single men and women in their thirties, most of whom are strangers to me, and it is as if I have just stepped into America. They are talking about the latest local basketball scores, what's on TV, an upcoming honeymoon to Portugal, how the daily boat to the mission control room on Meck Island (in the Ralik Chain of Kwajalein Atoll) is way too early. One man in an Army T-shirt is boasting about how he's finally leaving "the rock" because of a disagreement with his boss—"Can't wait to get off this island!" The others in the group don't believe him: "You know you'll be back—no one stays away from this place for long!"

Lisa passes me my drink and asks, "What's it like on Ebeye this time of night? I've never been there after dark—hell, I've almost never even been there during the day!"

A slightly older bachelor with a barbell moustache and a frayed red T-shirt interrupts her and gives me a firm handshake that hurts. "Hi, I'm Dan," he says as he seats himself beside me. After I explain who I am, he clinks his Corona against my glass and says in a heavy drawl, "No kiddin'—you're a Kwaj Kid, just like me!"

Squinting toward the moonlit lagoon, he takes a deep breath and says, "Bet you love this place, don'tcha? I mean, that water, the sound of these palm fronds swishing

around up above us. And you know that's not all of it, though." He turns away from the crowd and softens his voice.

"Kwaj is a smell, right? You know what I mean? It's a smell that gets under your skin and then you can never forget it. It's like this perfume that puts you to bed at night. It's this 'alone' kinda thing, just between you and the island. You feel it in your bones. And so many of these guys who come out here to Kwaj, they don't get it. They just come and go. Have little parties like this one, talk about the States all the time. But if you grow up here and you live here for a long time, and you really love these islands—you feel connected to it and you know you belong here. It's something you can't describe in words. I feel like I have to protect this place, not for America but for the island itself. It's so hard to explain, but if you could bottle up this smell somehow and you could tell all those people out there what it's about, they'd understand."

He goes silent for a moment and squints again toward the horizon, out at the flashing radar lights at the other end of the island. "You know something, it'd be a really horrible thing if I couldn't ever come back here again and again like I do. With the military and all that, it's just strange how we came out here in the first place, about all those Japanese people who died out here. I think of what happened every time I go down to one of those Japanese ships when I scuba dive. And it's weird how when I was a kid the kids of the chief from Ebeye would come over to my house and eat sandwiches with us for lunch. But that's Kwaj. For good or for bad, this place is my home, and I share it with these other people, and I don't know what it is, but it's that feeling I get, like the island needs me here or something.

"Sometimes," Dan continues, "you know it's like I just hate what America's doing here, what *I'm* doing here. I mean I do this weird job where I go out on a ship and make sure no one's on those little islands in the atoll when they do the missile tests. Why do we have to do those tests in the first place? And I understand it if Marshallese people don't want us here anymore with the lease expiring in 2016. We don't pay them enough money, don't pay them enough respect. We don't even let them on their own island half the time. And even then, a lot of people want the Americans to stay. But as a Kwaj Kid, I gotta be out here, gotta do my part so no one else comes and messes it up. I love this place and so I wanna take care of it somehow. I feel like that's my real job."



*Photo 3. Marshallese cemetery, overshadowed by a US Army radar installation, Kwajalein Atoll.
Photo by Greg Dvorak.*

4. Yukiko

It is mid-morning and the Kwajalein sunshine beats down brightly, as a group of twenty elderly Japanese gather around the memorial. It is labeled “Japanese Cemetery”; but the remains of the nearly 7,000 Japanese soldiers and sailors who died in the Battle of Kwajalein are in fact buried in various locations throughout the island and at numerous sites throughout the atoll, as well as in the sunken ships at the bottom of the lagoon. Only some of the remains have been repatriated to Japan.⁷ For the survivors of these men, the whole island is a cemetery.

The memorial is behind the Kwajalein Photo Lab out at the end of the runway, the site where American forces made their amphibious invasion of the island during the Pacific War, across the reef from the neighboring island of Enebu (Marshall 2001). It faces “Mount Olympus,” a complex of white radar domes and antennas used for tracking missiles. In 1965, the Japan Marshalls-Gilberts Bereavement Association proposed this memorial as a place to commemorate the souls of the war dead, where people could come

to mourn their lost loved ones. However, the cold war climate of secrecy and security at the time forbade the Japanese mourners to grieve on Kwajalein. The group wanted so badly to touch the earth where their spouses, brothers, and fathers eternally slept that they compromised by making a request for a hundred kilograms of coral sand to be shipped to Japan, and this request was granted. Not until the mid-1970s was the group granted access to the base, and even then it was only allowed a brief one-hour visit.⁸

The group that visits Kwajalein today has been granted three days of access to the atoll, under new policies that began five years ago.⁹ Before their ceremony, the bereaved families tidy up the memorial, pulling weeds and sweeping off the dust. They hang large yellow paper lanterns from the gate, arrange a spread of Japanese confections, sake, beer, and family photographs on the altar, and light incense. One by one, the mourners quietly approach the shrine, bowing and then reading out passionate letters to the dead soldiers on behalf of their families back in Japan. The letters tell of new children and family transitions, but the mourners also compare their experiences of Kwajalein to what it must have been like during the war. Michio says to his departed father, “To imagine that here on this plentiful island, rich with flowers and trees, there was a battle so intense that only one coconut tree was left standing, I mourn for how much suffering you must have endured.”

Above the memorial’s red torii shrine gate, two white birds dance in the sunlight. One of the women taps the Marshallese bus driver on the shoulder and asks him in English what kind of bird that is. He replies, “It’s a *kear*, the kind of bird that helps you find your way home when you are lost at sea.”

Standing beside the sea an hour later, Yukiko, a youthful woman in her late sixties with eyes swollen from grief, takes out a photograph from her purse and shows it to me. It is of a man in a white navy uniform. His skin is darkly tanned, and his eyes stare into the camera with a faint expression of loneliness. His pants are spattered with specks of dark paint. In the background are vines, like the shrubbery along the reef of Kwajalein. “That’s him,” she says, with tears brimming up. “Before he was drafted into the navy he worked for a paper mill. His name was Kametaro, but everyone called him Kame-chan for short. He was so popular in our town, always took care of people.” She strokes her father’s face in the photo lovingly and smiles.



Photo 4. Photo of Suzuki Kametaro, taken on Kwajalein c. 1943. Photographer unknown, courtesy of Suzuki Yukiko.

“He used to ride me down to the beach on the handlebars of his bicycle when I was a little girl. He loved the ocean and said he’d swim all the way back to Japan if his boat ever sank. When we went to drop him off at Yokosuka Harbor in 1941, we went there with my mother, my sister, and our dog Meri. I was just six years old. My family just stood there quietly and watched him sail away.” She dabs her eyes with a handkerchief and points to the north. “They tell me his ship sank somewhere right over . . . there.”

She whispers in a gentle, quiet voice, “The first time I came here, I felt something so warm and safe enveloping me. I felt the warm breeze on my cheeks, the sunshine. The air smelled so sweet. I looked out to the open ocean and saw those waves, tasted the salt

on my lips. It felt so familiar, so comforting, like I had been here before even though I hadn't. It felt like my hometown, my *furusato*. I mean, it is my home—I really feel that way, and I've never even lived here.”

5. *Encounters*

In an atoll, one can always see across the lagoon to other islands, whether or not one ever makes the crossing to actually set foot there. The presence of “others” is always felt, and so is the connection to them. It is probably for this reason that so many Marshallese legends honor the differences and contradictions between islands: Although land is precious and limited, the fact that each island is unique but part of a larger whole makes space for multiplicity and variation. Just as significantly, most Marshall Islanders have multiple family and clan affiliations between islands, all throughout the Marshall Islands, from different islands within atolls and between atolls. In this kind of paradigm, it is easier to imagine a heritage that appreciates multilocality while simultaneously appreciating the “big picture.”

These three diverse narratives from my recent fieldwork reveal the stark contradictions of life and layers of history that coexist in Kwajalein Atoll, but Raymond and Lora, Dan, and Yukiko are all tied together by their common desire to be home. While each of these histories—of the American community of Kwajalein, Marshallese landowners and laborers, and bereaved survivors of Japanese war dead—represents a radically different perspective, and each individual lives in a vastly different world or “island,” in reality these histories are interdependent. They crisscross together and form an atoll, like a vast and complex family. Sixty years after the war, there is now space to see beyond and between the battles waged here to begin a meaningful process of reconciliation.

Yet there are many barriers that make this “atollism” challenging. For the roughly 2,000–3,000 (estimates fluctuate) American civilians who work for defense contractors and their families, life is “Almost Heaven,” as Kwajalein T-shirts sold in the 1970s attested. But it is impossible for Kwajalein Marshallese landowners and other residents to return home or move freely through their atoll, and unthinkable for Americans and Japanese without proper permission to do the same. In the absence of a larger “atoll

consciousness,” the attitude of “that’s just the way it is” tends to prevail. Despite their awareness of the injustices that happen daily in Kwajalein, many Americans, Japanese visitors, and Marshallese elites do not venture to take action that would improve the situation.



Photo 5. American Independence Day (Fourth of July) celebrations on Kwajalein. Photo by Greg Dvorak.

Local Kwajalein Marshallese exasperation has intensified in recent years. The Compact of Free Association signed in 2003 between the United States and the Republic of the Marshall Islands includes a Military Use and Operations Agreement that grants the United States strategic access to Kwajalein until 2066, with an option to renew until 2086. The Kwajalein Negotiation Committee, comprising a number of *irooj* (chiefs), *alab* (clan heads), and senior *rijerbal* (workers) who have claims to the land, argue that their

government made this agreement behind their backs, and have refused to sign the new Land Use Agreement, which they believe offers far too little compensation for the future. As the Marshall Islands government is forbidden to own land, these private landowners insist that if they are not offered a new land use agreement before the current one expires in 2016, the United States will have to leave. While the United States consistently emphasizes its “internationally binding agreement” with the Marshall Islands government, this contingent of atoll landowners are adamant in their claims (*Marshall Islands Journal* 2005).

While the negotiation committee’s position is disputed by many Marshallese residents of Ebeye, many who have land rights in the atoll, this standoff between the Marshall Islands government and Kwajalein is delaying the release of much-needed funds for the development and maintenance of Ebeye and other islands. There tends to be a consensus among most Marshallese residents of Kwajalein Atoll, however, that even though more money is needed, a pullout of the US military would be catastrophic.

The failure to see the genealogical reef and the responsibilities inherent in that relationship is a major factor that contributes to these problems. At low tide, Ebeye and Kwajalein islets are so connected that one can easily walk the three miles of reef between them; yet they are so separated by discourses of development, colonialism, and security that they might as well be worlds apart. All too often, American narratives emphasize the dependency of Islanders on the United States, without acknowledging the interdependency that atoll-dwellers know so intimately. Japanese narratives, meanwhile, elide the prewar history of colonial integration and tend to justify a lack of interest by the Japanese government in supporting the region economically.

However, there is still space to explore the possibility of a shared heritage that not only invites island inhabitants—at Kwajalein and throughout Oceania—to recognize their interconnected “atollness,” but also challenges larger nations like Japan and the United States to engage on equal terms with “small” island states. After all, coral grows back, bringing new generations of possibility to grow slowly on the concrete, the landfill, the causeway, the beer bottles. It breaks through the cracks, bridging the impasses, forming new reefs, and starting all over again.

This article is based on my multi-sited ethnographic research in Kwajalein Atoll, other Marshall Islands, and Japan in 2004–2005. I have chosen to protect the identities of the “protagonists” of these short scenarios and have thus changed identifying details in certain cases, but these stories are based on actual interviews and quotes.

I would like to acknowledge the generous funding of the Australian National University and the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science for making this research possible. I would also like to thank the traditional leaders of Kwajalein Atoll for their blessings, the Marshallese Cultural Center and the Host Nations Office of US Army Kwajalein Atoll, and the residents of both Ebeye and Kwajalein for their enormous contributions. I am also indebted to the openness of the Japan Marshall Islands War-Bereaved Families Association in Tokyo in sharing their stories with me. This article is dedicated to the memory of Anjain Rowa, 1955–2006.

GREG DVORAK was born in Philadelphia but spent many of his formative years growing up in Kwajalein Atoll, Marshall Islands. Educated in both the United States and Japan, he studied at Waseda University in Tokyo and earned his BA in Asian studies (Japanese literature) and psychology from Rutgers College in 1996. After living in Japan for nearly ten years and working for the Japanese government and for an advertising firm, he went to the University of Hawai'i, where he obtained his MA in Pacific Islands studies with a certificate in international cultural studies in 2004. Having completed research in Australia, the Marshall Islands, and Japan (where he was based at Tokyo University on a fellowship from the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science), he is currently making a documentary film and writing his doctoral dissertation in interdisciplinary cross-cultural research (history and anthropology) at the Australian National University. His research is supported in part by Oceanic Encounters, an Australian Research Council-funded initiative at the ANU Gender Relations Centre, exploring themes of gender, sexuality, and culture in Oceania.

Notes

1. *Setsuei-butai* (literally, “construction corps”) were units of (usually paid) civilian contract laborers who worked for the Japanese military to build fortifications, barracks, and facilities to accommodate the massive increase in Japanese troops in the early 1940s. They were sometimes referred to as *ninpu*, or “laborers.” Depending on the location, these units consisted of men recruited from rural Japan, Okinawa, and Korea who had often been deemed unsuitable for combat. In Kwajalein Atoll and other sites, Marshallese men also worked with these groups. In some cases (such as in Wotje Atoll), units consisted of inmates from Japanese prisons.

2. Conversations with US Army Kwajalein Atoll archaeologist Leslie Mead, Kwajalein, 3 April 2005, and Ato Langkio, Ebeye, 28 March 2005.
3. Conversation with Imata Kabua, Majuro, 14 March 2005.
4. A night-blooming small white flower of the heliotrope family, the *utilomar* releases a haunting fragrance like jasmine and ylang-ylang but much more delicate. It is regarded as the most precious Marshallese flower for making leis and ceremonial crowns.
5. This is my translation from the original Japanese version of *Radical Oral History* (2004), an English version of which is forthcoming.
6. Being “treated like terrorists” is a common analogy drawn by many Marshallese workers and leaders in Kwajalein Atoll, seen in several of the letters to the editor of the *Marshall Islands Journal* between January and June 2005.
7. Conversation with Leslie Mead, Kwajalein, 3 April 2005.
8. Conversation with Satake Esu, Kwajalein, 6 October 2005. Satake Esu is the widow of a Japanese military pilot who was stationed in Kwajalein Atoll during the war; she is one of the oldest members of the Japanese Bereaved Families Association.
9. Conversation with Tamura Ryōichi, Tokyo, 23 January 2005.

References

Carucci, Laurence M

- 1989 The Source of the Force in Marshallese Cosmology. In *The Pacific Theater: Island Representations of World War II*, edited by Geoffrey White and Lamont Lindstrom, 73–96. Honolulu: University of Hawai`i Press.
- 1997 In Anxious Anticipation of Kuwajleen’s Uneven Fruits: A Cultural History of the Significant Locations and Important Resources of Kuwajleen Atoll. With translation by Alfred Capelle. Manuscript prepared for United States Army Space and Strategic Defense Command, Huntsville, Alabama.

Diaz, Vicente M

- 2001 Deliberating “Liberation Day”: Identity, History, Memory, and War in Guam. In *Perilous Memories: The Asia-Pacific War(s)*, edited by Takashi Fujitani, Geoffrey M White, and Lisa Yoneyama, 155–179. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Fukushige, Hiroshi

- 1987 Gyokusai no Shimajima. *Maru*, vol. 6. Tokyo: Shiobosho.

Hau`ofa, Epeli

- 1993 Our Sea of Islands. In *A New Oceania: Rediscovering Our Sea of Islands*, edited by Eric Waddell, Vijay Naidu, and Epeli Hau`ofa, 2–16. Suva: School of Social and Economic Development, University of the South Pacific, in association with Beake House.

Hokari, Minoru

2004 *Radical Oral History*. Tokyo: Ochanomizu Shobō.

Johnson, Giff

1982 Atoll Protesters “Occupy” Missile Sites. *National Catholic Reporter*. 27 August.

Langkio, Ato, and Kirong Sam

2005 Kwajalein in Japanese Times. Lecture with Greg Dvorak at Marshallese Cultural Center, Kwajalein, Marshall Islands, 12 May.

Marshall Islands Journal

2005 Iroj Imata: US Money Move Illegal. *Marshall Islands Journal*, 14 October.

Marshall, Samuel L A

2001 *Island Victory: The Battle of Kwajalein Atoll*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Teaiwa, Katerina Martina

2005 Between Our Islands. Lecture at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa /East-West Center, 2 March.