The movie ends with the 2012 change of government in Papua New Guinea and with the suggestion that the pro-industry bias will begin to shift in favor of landowners and balance the playing field, to some extent at least. It also ends with a threat of violence akin to the resistance that took place over environmental impacts of a huge copper mine in Bougainville (1988–1997). The movie thus ends with the suggestion that in the dialogue between global capitalism and local-level resource owners, at least for the moment in this one setting, the forces of global capital will not simply be free to have the last word. As I said at the outset, one would like to hope that this absorbing documentary portrays a dialogical relationship in this Bakhtinian sense between local community members, distant markets, transnational capital, and national and international political regimes. But somehow one does not feel too confident that this open-ended, egalitarian kind of dialogue can or will be sustained in the long run.

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*University of Minnesota*

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nity but also portray them as forced migrants, likely suffering from disease. This perception is further strengthened by text on the following black screen: “The Marshall Islands are ‘by far the most contaminated place in the world.’ US Atomic Energy Commission (AEC).” The stark presentation of these black-and-white statements mirrors filmmaker Dennis O’Rourke’s discriminating use of visual text in his 1985 documentary *Half Life: A Parable for a Nuclear Age* about the lives of the people of Rongelap, downwind of the largest of the nuclear tests. The technique is a powerful means of providing emphasis and influencing an audience’s interpretation of what follows and is artfully deployed in this feature film. The result draws attention to the intimate reality that works of fiction can achieve. The audience learns not only that Marshall Islanders have been victims of US weapons testing, but also that they might be better off anywhere other than their contaminated home islands. Thus the title of the film, referring to the Marshallese mythical island where souls return after death, suggests the audience compare and perhaps contrast Kona, to which the people of Enewetak Atoll have fled, with an otherworldly paradise. Eb is eventually explained at the conclusion of the film, in the telling of a traditional legend, as “a Kingdom under the sea. There, no one ever goes hungry.”

However, this is not a film about Marshallese victims. This is a film about the life and choices of one Marshallese family residing in Kona. How do they respond to the changes in their lives? Where do they go for help? Who do they depend on? Who understands them? How will they teach their children to stand proud and to know their story? The film’s work to reflect on this sense of community, cohesion, and agency is very subtle but clearly present.

The action begins when the audience is introduced to a gentle, burly, middle-aged man who begins to narrate the story of his family’s emigration to Kona from Ujelain Atoll, where the people of Enewetak were evacuated after the testing noted in the opening. Jacob (played by Jonithen Jackson) engages the unknown audience as he chokes up while describing his home, the forced evacuation, and the hardships of life in Enewetak. We later learn he is narrating his journey for his new grandson, Matthew, who appears as the scene shifts to the hospital room of Jacob’s daughter Ruth (Rojel Jonithen), where the family hold and embrace her newborn baby.

The backdrop to Jacob’s life is the coffee farm where he picks coffee beans for a living. He drives an old truck to work and back to his home, a dilapidated structure of plywood and tin, situated among other similar structures. There is no running water, and the port-o-let is located away from the houses. Jacob’s home is surrounded by items he collects with the intention of repairing or recycling. We discover that Jacob not only tells stories but also has an interest in making movies. He has constructed a camera boom and owns multiple cameras, with which he records his own stories. Resourceful and curious, Jacob appears eager to learn how things work and is an expert at jerry-rigging things. He tries to sell his repaired electronics to earn additional income for the family.
Early in the film the audience learns that Jacob’s cancer has returned when a woman doctor makes a phone call on Jacob’s behalf to schedule further tests for a tumor. Jacob tells no one, though we watch as he grows increasingly ill over the course of the film, feeling weak, nauseous, vomiting, and briefly losing consciousness while driving his truck. When his daughter realizes the severity of his illness, she informs her mother, Dorothy (Tarke Jonithen) and they confront him: “You should have told us. Get tested to be sure. We can get insurance.” But he explains that he needs to go to work (God’s will). Someday we’ll know why.” Like the family members in the film, the audience wonders why Jacob will not pursue the tests and the treatment for his cancer. Rather than battling cancer, Jacob focuses his energies on providing for his family’s security after his death.

Jacob actively seeks more income. He asks his boss for more work. He asks the cashier at the grocery if they are hiring. He attempts to sell his reconstructed items at the local swap meet. There he meets the antagonist of the story, a pidgin-speaking, loud, coffee field owner, Verne (Hilary Monson), who curses his own bothersome dogs and asks Jacob if he can recruit others to pick the coffee beans and then split the profits 50-50. Verne’s loud, forceful mannerisms contrast with Jacob’s silence and soft-spoken lines. The audience wonders if Jacob is naive, foolish, desperate, or all of the above. Foreshadowing the climax of the film, Ruth wonders aloud if Verne can be trusted. Jacob responds, “I took his word, that’s all I can do.”

The characters in this film repeatedly demonstrate where in work and family life they find their roles, their rights, their responsibilities in ways that might challenge Western assumptions. Although Jacob attempts to find extra income for his family, he feels he can only take people at their word and he accepts God’s will for his life. Like the Bikinian community’s response to US requests for them to leave their island for nuclear testing, the response—Men otomjej rej pädilo Pein Anij (Everything is in God’s hands)—may be hard for some audiences to comprehend or accept.

Yet within their large close-knit family, Ruth, Dorothy, and Jacob express more power and control over their lives. Jacob, angry at his daughter’s absent, irresponsible boyfriend Thomas (Jeff Nashion), refuses to pick him up from jail: “Not this time.” When Thomas later appears apologetically at the homestead, Jacob raises his voice the only time in the film, ordering the young man to leave: “Go home, don’t talk. Go.” Similarly, when Jacob insists on driving and heading to work even when he is obviously too ill, the family responds by taking his keys and demanding that Thomas take Jacob to the doctor and help him with his usual chores, including filling the water tanks for the family.

The climax of the film occurs when Jacob pulls into Verne’s driveway to be paid for all the coffee that he and his group of workers collected. It is Friday, payday, and he anticipates 50 percent of the coffee sales—but only a fraction is forthcoming. Discouraged, Jacob slowly returns to his truck, after which Thomas gets out of the truck, grabs a crowbar and violently smashes the rear window of Verne’s van. It’s a heartbreaking scene. The audience
knows how badly Jacob needs the money, how hard he worked for it, how he promised money to the other workers. Why does Jacob walk away rather than pursue his rightful payment? This is where the initial framing of the film gets in the way, as the audience is encouraged to see Jacob as a victim, exploited as his ancestors were at Enewetak. Yet one cannot deny Jacob’s decision to do things his way above all else. Unlike Thomas, he chooses to keep his cool and his self-respect. He follows behaviors that have been modeled for him for generations, behaviors valued more than confrontation. A Marshallese proverb involving a play on the word for anger, “-lu,” and the English word “lose” (or luuj) conveys this guideline succinctly: Ne kwollu kwolluj. (If you get angry, you lose). A resourceful man in a precarious position, Jacob will find another way to look after his family and their community. Although the injustice stings, I appreciate the film’s focusing on Jacob’s values and his experience rather than providing the confrontation the audience might expect or even desire.

An obvious audience for The Land of Eb is high school and college students, who would gain an intimate, personal perspective to aid discussions about migrant communities in Hawai‘i and elsewhere. Beyond the classroom, the film would appeal to general audiences, particularly those in areas where Pacific Islander communities reside. Further, this film would certainly appeal to Marshall Islander expatriates, who will empathize with the character of Jacob and the struggles the family face in their new environment. While not all Marshallese face as many challenges as the Ocean View/Kona community represented in the film, others immigrants might relate to the cultural differences and expectations for behavior that confront Marshallese values and ways of seeing the world.

One of the best features of this film is its tone—instrumental melodies parallel the muted, murky images of grey volcanic dust, dirt, cloudy skies, dilapidated vehicles, and faded paint. The photography conveys a certain respect for the lived experience of the characters and enhances the audience’s intimacy with the characters. This is a slow-moving, low-key film that suits its subject. I find the film refreshing for centralizing Marshallese perspectives and values, which on occasion challenge members of the audience to question their own assumptions about power and the best ways to care for those we love. In my mind, Jacob is heroic. It might have been tempting to create a character who would fight and argue, challenge authority, and seek justice from a despicable, cruel farm owner. Yet Jacob’s greatest strength is the ability to stay focused on his priorities of family and community in the midst of the inevitable stress of being an immigrant, experiencing prejudice, being diagnosed with cancer, while wondering how to feed another child and how to pass along essential family history and identity. This story of one family’s journey from Enewetak to Ujelañ, out of the Marshall Islands, to the questionable paradise of Kona, Hawai‘i provides a glimpse into the lives and values of a proud and peaceful people.

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