Book and Media Reviews

Giff Johnson’s memorable book introduces to the world his late wife, Darlene Keju, and successfully transfers to written form Darlene’s lived passion for improving the health and resiliency of the Marshallese people. Don’t Ever Whisper chronicles Darlene’s journey from being a shy high school student who barely spoke English to becoming a powerful spokesperson and successful community organizer. Johnson describes Darlene’s international speaking engagements that informed outsiders about the social ills connected to US colonization. Through Darlene’s unabashed speeches, audiences learned the depths of the horrors and challenges resulting from US government activities on her home islands. With humility, Johnson (the well-known editor of the Marshall Islands Journal newspaper) shows his respect for the culture and people of the Marshall Islands, his home for many decades. Despite the important role he has played in shaping the media in Oceania, he essentially removes himself from this story of US betrayal and Marshallese perseverance, at times referring to himself in the third person.

Johnson’s book amplifies the voice of Darlene and enables the reader to put a human face on the pain of colonization, particularly the suffering resulting from the nuclear era, which continues to this day. Each of the thousands of Marshallese whose lives mattered less to the US government than its military interests—those whose lives ended prematurely, whose babies were not viable, who served as test subjects for US government biomedical research, who were contracted by the US Department of Energy to “clean-up” radioactive lands, who were forced from their home islands, who endure illness or tend to sick family members, who are displaced for US missile testing, who must migrate to find health care and work—each of these people has a story to tell that is worthy of our understanding. It is through Darlene that we glimpse the tsunami of collective pain that resides in the Marshall Islands that we must grapple with as part of the horrors of nuclear weaponry.

Johnson chronicles his late wife’s anger and concern about the US government’s downplaying of the health impacts resulting from the sixty-seven atmospheric nuclear weapons tests it conducted. As he notes, the US government created “myths” about who was or was not exposed to radiation as a result of US activities and, consequently, who was eligible for the minimal health care provided by the US government. Johnson characterizes these myths as “carefully crafted lies that have guided US policy toward the islands since 1954 and continue to stand as a roadblock for resolving the many problems caused by US nuclear testing” (367). One of the most enduring myths that continues to influence US policies toward the Marshall Islands maintains that the US weapons testing program adversely affected only four atolls out of thirty-
three. Darlene was not from one of those four “exposed” atolls—Bikini and Enewetak, the two ground zero locations, and Rongelap and Utrik, the two communities evacuated for medical experimentation following exposure to the Bravo test’s radioactive fallout on 1 March 1954—and therefore was not eligible to receive US-provided health screening or care. This myth and the consequences it had on Darlene’s ability to receive health care, poignantly support Johnson’s contention that modern-day health care challenges are linked to US Cold War decision making.

When Darlene contracted breast cancer, the disease that stole her life, the myths that served as the basis of US public policies meant flying from the Marshall Islands to Hawai‘i for mammograms, surgery, and other treatment. Johnson describes how Darlene had to tear herself away from active engagement in the community, from her pioneering work as a youth and community health educator, from her family, and from her culture to receive care in Hawai‘i. She did not want to leave the Marshalls, but there was no mammography machine or oncologist in the country to care for her.

The crime of this story is that it could still happen today. These are not issues of the Cold War past; they are issues Marshallese confront every day. The year 2014 marks the sixtieth anniversary of the Bravo test, the largest and dirtiest of the US weapons tests, and still today Marshallese cannot receive chemotherapy or see an oncologist in their home country. The US government’s failure to adequately address the scope of damages and injuries caused by the testing program contributes to the social fallout that infects the policies and attitudes toward Micronesians in Hawai‘i and elsewhere in Oceania.

Our hope for challenging the historic myths and their contemporary counterparts is in the same generation that Darlene looked to for inspiration: the youth. Johnson describes how going to school and living in Hawai‘i transformed Darlene. She struggled at times to overcome barriers to higher education but eventually earned a graduate degree in public health from the University of Hawai‘i. Through her graduate work and her activism, Darlene learned to draw from the best of two worlds; she found pride and strength in her culture and combined this with ideas from her graduate studies about privileging local knowledge and culture in the design of health care programs. Johnson describes how Darlene returned to the Marshall Islands after graduate school as a woman emboldened with new ideas and energy, and how her approaches bristled against cultural norms about how women should behave and dress, as well as the types of conversations that were appropriate for public conversation (eg, family planning was not an acceptable topic). Darlene had a vision, however, and would not be deterred.

We all need to find our inner Darlene: the commitment to help others find and cultivate their strengths, the vision to create solidarity with our allies, the unquestioned belief that each one of us has the ability to make change, and, of course, the courage required to never give up. Darlene’s model of teaching youth to find
their voice and to use it—don’t ever whisper—transformed communities. Darlene tapped the strengths of the Marshallese culture to create health education projects that successfully reduced teenage pregnancy rates, but more importantly, they helped young people realize that they are essential ingredients to social change.

Darlene’s legacy reminds us that to take on challenges as formidable as nuclear testing, climate change, or migration, we cannot leave anyone out; the generations that made many of the problems that youth will inherit now need to build the skills of young people and make space for them to participate in our collective problem solving. The greatest tribute to Darlene is to take action and to speak out. Johnson encourages us to heed the words on his late wife’s gravestone: “Tuak Bwe Elimaj-nonon”—don’t be afraid to make your way through strong ocean currents to the next island (365)—a call to join hands and challenge the twin evils of colonialism and US national security interests.

Johnson’s book is an important step toward dismantling the abject racism of US government policies that deem Micronesians as not worthy of US standards of health care or environmental cleanup. The dominant, persistent, and crass narrative that regurgitates US-constructed myths and continues to portray Micronesians as less deserving of adequate health care and a clean environment clings to Micronesians and shadows communities in their migration. Johnson brings forth a heroine, at a time when we absolutely need one: a Marshallese woman who insisted on everyone’s right to live with respect and dignity.

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Vernadette Vicuña Gonzalez’s Securing Paradise presents a bold and creative argument for understanding the twinned projects of tourism and US militarism in the Pacific as grounded in multiple but always overlapping discourses of security. Gonzalez situates security within the pervasive post-9/11 rhetoric of “national security” as well as the historical and contemporary modes of securing Hawai‘i and the Philippines as (official and unofficial) possessions of the United States. Linking those forms of security with present-day fears around economic security and travel security, Gonzalez persuasively shows that though tourism has long been understood as the “softer’ colonial apparatus” (5) since the Cold War, the tourism industry in Hawai‘i and the Philippines has quite effectively taken up many of the ideological and economic demands of the US military under a neoliberal and neocolonial guise. Crucially, these multiple forms of security operate through a romance grounded in long-