AELOŃ IN AIBOJOOJ:
VISUAL RECLAMATION OF MARSHALLESE AGENCY

MASTER’S PORTFOLIO
2019

by

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Mahalo nui loa

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Introduction

The phrase, Aelōñ in Aibojooj, means “beautiful small things” in Marshallese. It is the name that the creators of this photography project chose for their exhibition and is perhaps the best metaphor to describe this portfolio. Because this portfolio is comprised of so many beautiful everyday acts of generosity, of welcome and patience, that begin with an invitation to conduct a workshop hosted by Jo-Jikum and ends with an exhibition presented at the closing of the 2nd National Climate Change Dialogues. This work belongs to Alma, Danielson, Darren, William, Boh, Francis, Chris, Timmy, Kelly, Leit, and Fern, who were given cameras and who decided to trust in a process of sharing perceptions of home looks through their own eyes. This portfolio also belongs to Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner and her organization Jo-Jikum who are fighting for climate justice and who promoted this project.

I initially turned to the Marshall Islands to conduct this portfolio project because they are at the forefront of climate justice issues and because I received an invitation by Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner to conduct a series of art workshops with the young adults she worked with in the Marshalls. Many different kinds of art and social justice workshops had already been offered here, so I wanted to make sure that I offered something that was both unique and empowering for the participants. I had noticed a profound lack of images about the Marshall Islands actually being produced and controlled by the Marshallese. When I explored the issue further with Kathy, she agreed that while one person had come to do a photography workshop before, she had only loaned cameras and nothing really came of it. Therefore, I knew that I wanted to create a space where the participants felt complete ownership over the process, including having cameras of
their own to keep. I hoped to support them in responding to and challenging the visual perceptions of the Marshall Islands that have long been dominated by a foreign lens. A deep analysis of the photography being produced about the Marshall Islands was also sorely lacking. For while there are a number of photographic collections, most notably, the Joachim de Brum, Jack Tobin and Trust Territory collections, they are not collections that have thoroughly researched from the perspective of material culture studies.

I realized very quickly that this is not a project about climate justice, as much as it is a project about the ways we, as Pacific Islanders, see our own homelands and how that stands in direct opposition to the colonial gaze. I hoped that the workshops would produce an empowering exhibition, that combined contemporary photographs and family photographs. But instead we produced an entirely contemporary exhibition and website that became a part of a national dialogue on climate justice and political economy. In many ways more powerful than I could have anticipated.

This portfolio begins with the external perceptions of the Marshall Islands in black and white photography, taken by American, German and Japanese colonizers, anthropologists, military photographers and photojournalists. It ends with a radical shift in optics of the Marshall Islands, particularly Majuro, that is seen through Marshallese eyes and their connection to land.

The lies we were told

My first visual memory of the Marshall Islands is a mushroom cloud rising out of the Pacific over Bikini Atoll. The horror of that photograph burned into my memory as a child and remains into adulthood. The power of that image obliterated the seascape of our origins. As people of Oceania, we belong to the sea, we are fed by it, navigate
within it and it is often the source of our creation stories. Our lands extend into the seabed and into the waters of atoll lagoons. Nuclear tests performed by the United States Atomic Energy Commission, literally detonated bombs that were stronger than the bombs that hit Hiroshima, in the waters and lands of Marshallese homelands. Those of us outside of the Marshalls, rarely got to see the people or their lands, we were only given images of the bombs exploding the reefs and the salt waters into the sky, obliterating a storied landscape. I realized even as a child that a single image repeated, had the power to define a space. That single image, of a nuclear sea, is a constant visual reminder of what empire is capable of in Oceania. It has also been used as a tool to control the narrative of the Pacific and to try and prevent us from seeing the complexities and importance of the Marshallese people.

The Marshall Islands were chosen as a site for nuclear testing following World War II, because the Marshall Islands were under the trusteeship of the United States. Although there were 31 atolls, spanning over 500,000 square miles, no single atoll contained large amounts of inhabitants and the atolls were considered to be safely outside western trade routes and fishing lanes. Bikini was specifically selected because it only had 167 residents, who were promised to be safely returned after the testing. Under the trusteeship, the islanders had “little political power or representation to contest the American government’s determination to conduct nuclear tests in the islands”(Titus 1986, 36-37). Following the nuclear program, which rendered any return impossible and leaving thousands sick as a result of nuclear fall-out for generations since, Henry Kissinger had this to say about the future of the U.S. Trust Territory,
“There are only 90,000 people out there. Who gives a damn?” (Kiste 1974, 198). It is clear from this statement and their small population that the land of the Marshalls and its people were deemed small and unimportant. Oceania scholar, Teresia Teaiwa reminds us, “It ends up being all about bodies—but vastly different ways of finding meaning in bodies” (Teaiwa 1994, 101). For Marshallese bodies to have meaning, first the must be seen.

The U.S. government permanently relocated the rimajel (Marshallese, from the Marshalls) of Bikini, Rongerik, Enewetak, Alinginae, Jemo, Mejit, Taka, Utirik, Wotho and Rongelap (Goin 1991, 11). The people of Bikini were relocated first and agreed to settle on Rongerik, when it was found that this atoll was not sustainable due to lack of resources, they were moved to Rongelap. Operation Ivy in 1952, expanded testing to Enewetak atoll not only permanently relocating the inhabitants of Bijire and Aomon, but vaporizing the entire island Elugelab. Following the “Bravo” shot of Operation Castle in 1954, radiation ash fell onto the islands of Rongelap, Alinginae, Jemo, Mejit, Taka, Utirik and Wotho. This all began in 1946, for the purposes of a set of tests called Operation Crossroads, when a naval task force under the command of W.H.P. Blandy, asked the people of Bikini to sacrifice their island for “the good of mankind and to end all wars” (Kiste 1974, 28). The Navy translators, having no word for bomb in Marshallese, told the islanders they were bringing them a new god in full view of photojournalists. In a publicity film by Universal, narrator Ed Herlihy declares, “American officials discuss plans with the Bikini natives for the evacuation of the Atoll. The islanders are a nomadic group and are well pleased that the Yanks are going to add a little variety to their lives” (Hales 2014, 24). This somehow implies a native consent, almost pleasure, in this
removal from their homeland and this kind of propaganda continues in a steady stream of newsreels that came out week after week in 1946. Rongerik was cast as even better than Bikini, “where there is more rain and better coconuts, and as a grinning Juda (irooj of Bikini) was brought back to watch the first test, other natives were imported to admire the second” (Hales 2014, 25). These films created for the Atomic Energy Commission Public Relations office were designed to promote a narrative and to visually reassure the American public that they were safe. Nuclear testing coincided with photography, blast tests required photography, propaganda demonstrating that the Marshallese were happy and being looked after by the United States, required photography, medical documentation of fallout to show their care and treatment of the sick all required photography.

The US refused to see anything beyond its own desires. No sooner had the ri-Bikini been relocated, that 42,000 US military and civilian personnel were sent to Bikini. “The islands were bulldozed, and cement runways were built. Support bases, recreational facilities, docks, chapels and work stations were established” (Gloin 1991,9). This where their trust had been placed, in a nation that did not value one island in an atoll over another, that used their faith in God and desire for peace as a form of manipulation.

Other American driven visual narratives arose soon after nuclear testing. One month after the fallout of the “Bravo” shot, the film, Nuclear Savage shows Lewis Strauss of the Atomic Energy Commission declaring to reporters that the fallout on the people of the Marshalls was an accident because the wind had failed to follow the predictions of the meteorologists (Horowitz 2012, 15:38). However, the Navy waited
more than “+50 hours” to evacuate Rongelap even though the radiated ash covered an area more than 250 miles long (16:42 - 17:04). In the same press conference, Strauss went on to declared that the task force commander had promptly relocated all of islanders of Rongelap, Utitik and Rongerik and took them to Kwajalein to be treated and he then went on to say, “all 236 natives all seem to be well and happy. Today a full month after the event, the medical staff on Kwajalein... anticipate no illness.” (18:12 - 18:26).

Even as nuclear fallout victims with burns all over their body and with hair falling out in clumps, they are declared to be happy by the very government that used them as human guinea pigs. We know that they were treated as bio-medical test subjects because it was included in the list of programs entitled Project 4.1, “Study of Response of Human Beings Exposed to Significant Beta and Gamma Radiation due to Fall-Out from High Yield Weapons”(Cronkite, et. al 1954), that was included in documents relating to Operation Castle that was originally published in November 1953. The Rongelap contradicted the Atomic Energy Commission declarations of native happiness and good medical care by saying “they treated us like... animals” (19:14 -19:16). In April 1957, a reporter in a newsreel shot from AERC Labs in Chicago, states

These are fishing people, savages by our standards. John is mayor of Rongelap, which is 100 miles from Bikini. When the white powder fell, Tema thought it was snow. It was not snow but incinerated coral, highly radioactive. The Marshallese caught by fallout got 175 renchins of radiation. Most humans are exposed to less than 20 renchins in a lifetime. So a cross section, a delegation was brought to Chicago for testing. The
first was John, the mayor of Rongelap atoll. John [Anjain] as we said, is a savage but a happy amenable savage. His grandfather ran almost naked on his coral atoll. John reads, knows about God and is a pretty good mayor (Horowitz 2012, 30:37 -31:27).

I include this long excerpt from this film this black and white newsreel, that shows mayor John Anjain and a group of other Marshallese men, being described as savages, even though they look like everyone else in the 1950’s, with pressed pants and v-neck sweaters and blazers, that the newscaster made a special point of stating had been lent to them in Hawai‘i and that they would return in Hawai‘i. They were placed in lab coats, put into an iron room beneath a large x-ray machine and afterwards they were “given apples and other good things to eat… on their way back to the islands of Uterik, Rongerik, Majuro and Rongelap, in the middle of the Pacific, where hardly anybody lives” (32:00 -32:19) to show that at no time did the U.S. see the people of Rongelap, Utrik or Ronerik, they saw test “savages” and “test subjects” who apparently did not know how to care for themselves. The films and photographic images, produced by the US following nuclear fallout never broke from the narrative of the happy and content native, despite being told that they have absorbed radiation at nearly 10 times the amounts of other humans over a lifetime. There was also the continual narrative of sparsely populated islands to justify their destruction and to reinforce how few people were harmed.

I will not show photographs of medical studies in this portfolio, out of respect for the rimajel of those atolls who have already been exposed beyond measure. They have died from thyroid cancer and have lost their children and grandchildren to other forms of
cancer; who were allowed to resettle radiated islands in 1957, only three years after the Bravo test, and where they remained for another twenty-eight years, at the encouragement of Dr. Robert A. Conard, who had been the first to examine the ri-Rongelap. They returned only to get sick again and once more have their bodies become sites of scientific study, because they were not seen as civilized bodies. At a meeting in January 1956, Atomic Energy Commissioner, Merill Eisenbud is quoted as saying, during a NYC AEC meeting,

That island is by far the most contaminated place on Earth and it will be very interesting to get a measure of human uptake when people live in a contaminated environment. Now, data of this type has never been available. While it is true that these people do not live the way westerners do, civilized people, it is nonetheless also true that they are more like us than the mice. (Eisenbud 1956, 232).

The ri-Rongelap absorbed radiation from the sand, from the coconuts and the water. Every part of that island remained contaminated while the US watched them become ill and lose children and they photographed them during the entire process but refused to move them. In May 1985, Greenpeace sent the ship Rainbow Warrior to evacuate the island and bring the islanders to Mejatto, calling it the “Exodus Project”. There are photographs on the Greenpeace website that can be viewed by the public, but whose photographs are still under copyright. Rising out of the Nuclear Free Pacific protests and lawsuits filed by the Marshallese of Bikini relating to the devastating health impacts of nuclear fallout, we see an image of the rimajel shifting from victim to activist, however, the external image is still promoted as a people in need of rescue,
dependent upon the generosity of westerners. When the RMI gained its independence in 1986, the Compact of Free Association was radically changed, with the U.S. Congress allocating a $150 million trust fund for the nuclear victims of Bikini, Enewetak, Rongelap and Utirik, who were exposed during the time of testing (Johnson 1988, 67-85). A subsequent lawsuit was filed by rı-Bikini for $450 million for cleanup and resettlement, to which the US Congress provided an additional $90 million towards these efforts (Johnson 1992, 49).

Rather than being seen and welcomed for receiving some small form of justice, the current image of Marshall Islanders, particularly in Hawai’i where much of the necessary healthcare is provided, is reduced to a regional description of being Micronesian, they endure a kind of regional erasure and racism that ignores the complexities and distinct differences among the people of RMI and the Federated States of Micronesia. In 2011, efforts by Hawai’i Senators, Espero, Gabbard and Shimabukuro and House Representatives Cabanilla and Mizuno proposed a resolution strongly urging the US Department of the Interior to increase its funding for migrants arriving from COFA countries, to create criteria for eligibility for care and to create chemotherapy and dialysis centers in Micronesia (SCR053 SD1 (SSCR 1000)); (HR0038 HD1 (HSCR 1056)). Previously, in 2009, Senator Fukanaga and House Representative Say only requested additional Federal Aid (SCR062 SD1 (SSCR 1119)); (HCR 158). The 2011 resolution expands the resolution to require the members of Compact Free Association Nations to suddenly meet eligibility requirements. Essentially, these legislators were complaining about the burden placed on the state to provide healthcare to Micronesians, but additionally fueling existing tensions within the
local Hawai‘i community who were not always informed or did not care about the health impacts of nuclear testing or the agreements made within the Compacts of Free Association. Tourist focused magazines such as Honolulu also essentialized Micronesians, presenting them all as “Coming from a subsistence life on tiny atolls, without electricity or other basic utilities” (honolulumagazine.com 2011), continuing the image of the Pacific Islander that is not a part of contemporary society.

Returning to the 50th anniversary of the Bravo test, US Ambassador Greta Morris came to Majuro to commemorate the test. She did not arrive with an apology or express any regret to the Marshallese people for the multi-generational harm that has been inflicted upon them, but instead thanked them for their contribution to the nuclear testing program for the protection of the “free world” that all Marshallese people should take great pride (Morris 2004). Where the Marshallese should see the image of a remorseful America, they once again find an America that continues to promote an image of innocence and the erasure of Marshallese suffering.

As we enter into this new era of climate change, fueled by this nuclear history and endless militarization of their waters, visual images of the Marshall Islands as disappearing islands, fill social science and marine science journals, as well as, mainstream publications like the New York Times. The external image of the Marshalls continues to be one dominated with visuals of erasure and disappearance, of forced migration and possible extinction. Scientists continue to come to the Marshall islands presenting images of rising sea levels that show the Majuro airport underwater and then pitch single solutions of dredging islands to the Marshallese government. “I would rather destroy some reef than see an entire culture go extinct” (Fletcher 2018), states
American climate paleontologist Chip Fletcher, who is among those encouraging the Marshall Islands to seriously consider dredging islands as an option. However, these single solution answers are not easily or readily accepted by many Marshallese.

Maloelap Councilman and environmental consultant, Mark Stege had this response to Fletcher, “people have been engineering the Marshall Islands for decades, going back to dredging by the U.S. military to fill in the mejje, or reef flats between islands” (Stege 2018). Stege instead promotes community-based resource management.

The failing of arguments like Fletcher’s is that it refuses to see that cultures do not go extinct if they are forced to move, they shapeshift and do what is necessary to hold onto their culture. But more than this, the Fletcher model places the responsibility entirely on the Marshalls, rather than on those who are responsible, arguing that they won’t change fast enough. Island dredging is a corporate solution to a corporation caused problem. Arriving in the Marshall islands with PowerPoint slides of erasure, feeds “a mentality that tells us that we are vulnerable, we are victims” (Jetnil-Kijiner 2014, 14). Not only do the Marshallese have to endure the way that they are scene from foreign perspectives, scientists like Fletcher also present a desire to control what rimajel can see and imagine for themselves.

But at what point do the Marshallese people get to control their own lens? Both the ways they are seen and what they can imagine. How do the images change? How can those images be used as tools for healing and transformation?

That is what this portfolio is hoping to uncover by starting a journey of deeper sight through photographs and captions. A journey that begins with the question, when
the Marshallese are free to present and control their own image, how does that begin
to upset centuries of foreign desires and lies?

**Opening the aperture**

This journey begins in 2012 with the poem “Tell Them” by Marshallese spoken word
artist Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner.

…tell them
we are a proud people
 toasted dark brown
as the carved ribs
of a tree stump
tell them we are the descendants
of the finest navigators
in the world
tell them our islands
were dropped from a basket
carried by a giant
tell them we are the hollow hulls
of canoes as fast as the wind
slicing through the Pacific sea
we’re wood shavings
and drying pandanus leaves
and sticky bwiros at kemems
tell them we are sweet harmonies
of mothers aunties sisters
songs late into night
tell them we are whispered prayers
the breath of god
a crown of fuchsia flowers
covering aunty Mere’s white sea foam hair
tell them we are Styrofoam cups
of Kool-Aid red…
we are skies uncluttered
majestic and sweeping in their landscape
we are the ocean
terrifying and regal in its power
tell them we are dusty rubber slippers
swiped from concrete doorsteps
we are the ripped seams
and broken door handles of taxis
we are sweaty hands
shaking another sweaty hand in heat
tell them we are days and nights
hotter than anything you can imagine
tell them we are little girls with braids
cartwheeling beneath the rain
we are shards of broken beer bottles
burrowed beneath fine white sand
we are children flinging
like rubber bands
across a road clogged with chugging cars
tell them
we only have one road

and after all this
tell them about the water
how we have seen it rising
flooding across our cemeteries
gushing over our sea walls
and crashing against our homes
tell them what it is like to see the entire ocean level
with the land
tell them
we are afraid
tell them we don't know
about the politics
or the science
but tell them we see
what is in our own backyard…

but most importantly, tell them
we don't want to leave
that we have never wanted to leave
and that we
are nothing without our islands

The first time I saw Kathy perform “Tell Them” I was working on my second bachelor degree in fine art, with a focus on photography at the University of Hawaii at Mānoa. I was exploring issues of climate change in my art practice and very concerned with rising sea levels in the Pacific. “Tell Them” moved me deeply and I was amazed by the ways that Kathy openly rejected the label of climate change refugee. The language of Marshallese disappearance, as has been thorough discussed, begins in 1954 with nuclear testing, this language only takes on new forms with the label of climate change refugee, but share the same root cause, unchecked imperial expansion and resource extraction. Rising sea levels that erode the land and inundate crops with salt water, are among a list of material conditions that currently impact the Marshall Islands that first occurred under colonialism and now neo-colonialism. US scientists began discussing
the rise of global temperatures due to greenhouse gases as early as the 1970’s (Pacific Stars and Stripes, Sept 26, 1971) and concerns about rising sea levels claiming islands were beginning to raise alarms in the late 1990’s (Reed 2002). At the core of discussions surrounding climate change are concerns of forced migration and resettlement. The issue of permanent displacement is now a part of government and public discourse for all island nations, but especially the low-lying atolls of the Pacific. The only clear link between climate change and migration are conditions that render the land uninhabitable such as extreme loss of land and food insecurity (Campbell 2014, 11). Jetnil-Kijiner refuses to see climate change as a foregone conclusion and insists on fighting to stay on her islands.

Using spoken word as an instrument for social change and rallying cry for political activism, she has become one of the leading voices for climate justice in the world. Her recognition as a leading voice begins when she presented her poem, “Dear Matafele Peinam,” to the United Nations Climate Summit opening ceremony in 2015. This poem presented to world leaders on how sea level rise caused by climate change was directly affecting her homeland, received a standing ovation from the UN delegates. The video of this poem went viral and Kathy catapulted to star status almost overnight and returned the fate of the Marshall Islands back into the global imaginary. Only this time, the words were being shared by an empowered Marshallese woman spoken word artist. Since then, Jetnil Kijiner has spoken on climate justice at the Conference of the Parties 21(COP21) UN Climate Change Conference in Paris 2015, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC COP22) in Marrakech 2016, worked with the Climate Warriors campaign directed by 350 Pacific and she has spoken
on CNN, Democracy Now, and NBC news. She has also been featured in Huffington Post, National Geographic, Vogue and was awarded Impact Hero of the Year by Earth Company in 2015. In 2017, Jetnil Kijiner became the first Marshallese writer to publish her own book of poetry, *Jep Jāltok: Poems from a Marshallese Daughter*. Most recently, in 2018, she brought members of her non-profit Jo-Jikum to the Vatican to discuss climate justice and she performed a poem for Pope Francis.

In 2014, inspired by Kathy’s spoken word, I focused my BFA exhibition on climate change, creating salt maps of Kiribati, Tuvalu and the Carterets, who like the Marshalls are addressing issues of climate change and forced migration. The salt in these maps became signifiers for king tides and the inundation of salt into crops that forced people to migrate. I invited Kathy and other poets to share their work on climate change. For a few short hours, the gallery became a politicized space, filled with people from all parts of Oceania sharing their poetry and concerns. In the midst of that event I realized that I had only listened to the ending of the poem… tell them about the water… I had only seen the water, I had only heard the fear.

I had been swept away by the dominant narrative of disappearing islands being presented to me by mainstream media and documentaries. It was not only the Marshall Islands, but Tuvalu, Kiribati, the Carterets, and places in the Solomon Islands. The photos and videos and documentaries of disappearing islands were overwhelming. It was the mushroom cloud all over again, this time compounded with graves falling into the sea. I thought that I had known better, I thought I had developed a deeper analysis as a photographer. But the dominant visuals and narratives were still so strong that I could hear poems like “tell them,” believe that I was truly listening and still walk away.
with only half the story. My art practice needed to fundamentally shift toward work that facilitates a return to the love of and connection to the ʻāina. I needed to return to the words, “tell them we don’t want to leave, we have never wanted to leave” (Jetnil Kijiner 2012). I needed see the images that reinforced this repeatedly and encourage others to see why the rimajel should not be made to leave and to picture and create pathways for them to stay.

Over the years, Kathy and I have become close friends. Her poetry informing my art work, her work in climate justice informing aspects of my own activism. Kathy graduated in 2014 from the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa with a master degree in Pacific Islands Studies. She returned home to Majuro to teach at the College of the Marshall Islands and she co-founded a non-profit youth organization called Jo-Jikum. Jo-Jikum stands for Jodrikdrik in Jipañ ene eo e Kutok Maroro (Youth for a Greener Environment). The organization promotes Marshallese youth advocacy, activism, and cultural stewardship toward finding solutions to the challenges arising from climate change. Jo-Jikum utilizes a variety of artistic approaches to develop their messaging: storytelling, spoken word, podcasts, campaign memes, video and mural painting. No one, however, had offered photography workshops that provided participants with cameras that they could keep. Noticing this gap, I offered to provide cameras and facilitate a series of photography workshops to support their activism and to explore the question, “what would Marshall Islanders photograph to convey the meaning of their home?”

Kathy generously invited me to offer the workshops during July 2018, which just happened to coincide with the 2nd National Climate Change Dialogue, a collaboration
with the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC) Partnership. Unknown to either of us prior to arrival, the photography that participants would produce in the workshops, would later be included in the closing reception. The inclusion of the participants’ photographs in a government reception framed the work in a new light and raised its level of importance. It also increased the level of stress for participants. They were expecting to have at least two weeks to design an exhibition and suddenly, they had to produce an exhibition in five days! The result of the National Dialogue exhibition was inspiring, but it did not stop there; the participants wanted to share their work with other Marshall Islanders in the diaspora, but they also wanted to share their perspectives with non-Marshall Islanders. Therefore, they requested that the photos not only be printed, but also be included in a website that they would manage and eventually expand.


Europe and the United States have an extractive relationship with the islands of Oceania. They have extracted our resources on land and by sea, our bodies for labor, our weapons and crafts for museums, our belief systems to Christianize us, our language and knowledge systems to discount them, our governance to control us, and our image to exoticize or dehumanize us. Photography in many ways has been weaponized against the people of Oceania by foreign colonizers. In On Photography, Susan Sontag touches on the concept of power and photography when she wrote, “To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge - and, therefore, like power” (Sontag 1977, 3). A photograph is expected to be truth and it is treated as evidence as a replication of reality, but of course it is not truth. Photographs are subjectively
designed by the photographer, and the meaning of the photograph “is culturally
circumscribed by ideas of what is significant or relevant at any given time, in any given
context” (Edwards 2001,9) by the viewer.

There are no shortage of photographs, photo postcards, videos, and
documentaries looking at the Marshall Islands, but few are produced by Marshall
Islanders themselves. There are perhaps several reasons for this. Photography arrived
as a documentary practice of the German colonials, Japanese anthropologists and later
by the American military. Photographic collections of the Marshall Islands are primarily
held and offered to the public by foreigners in library and museum collections who
received those collections from the descendants of German traders and colonials,
missionaries, Japanese and American military, anthropologists and researchers,
tourists, peace corps volunteers, etc. There is one notable exception -
Joachim de Brum.

Figure 1: “Joachim de Brum self-portrait,” circa 1920
Source: Joachim de Brum Photograph Collection (Image B -109)
Joachim de Brum was born in 1869 on the island of Ebon and died in 1937 on Likiep Atoll. He was the eldest of a Portuguese trader named José de Brum and Likemeto, a Marshallese woman from Maloelap Atoll. de Brum was a bit of a jack of all trades, and became a successful businessman, postal agent, a self-taught artist, builder, engineer, scientist and photographer (Spennemann, 2003). The Alele Museum and Public library houses his collection of 2,500 glass plate negatives ranging in size from 2” x 3” to 8” x 10” of the land and life of the Marshall Islands between 1890 to 1930. Although many negatives have suffered from mold, humidity and salt damage over the years, his collection is hailed to be the most complete visual record of the German colonial period (1886 -1918)(Rosoff, et al., 2001) in the islands. On October 15, 1885, the Germans “held a formal ceremony and a Declaration of Protection was signed by German officials and Marshallese iroojs, to emphasize that the Marshall Islands were under the protection of the German Empire” (CLEM 2016, “Foreign Influence and World War II). The Germans remained the colonial administrators until the start of World War I, when 5 Japanese warships landed troops and raised their flag on October 3, 1914 (Kramer 1934, 14). Japan controlled the islands until the end of World War II in 1946.

Prior to World War II, de Brum’s collection was stored underground on an outer atoll to ensure its protection from U.S. bombing.

On several occasions, de Brum posed subjects in traditional dress or engaged them in cultural practices that were no longer in wide use for the purposes of cultural memory (Labriola and Hanlon 2013, 35). Much of his style may have been informed by German anthropologists who were also present during this time. Yet, it is also clear that he was just curious about the medium, photographing family, friends,
workers and members of the church repeatedly, with various backdrops of floral sheets or pandanus mats, sometimes with subjects holding local flowers or accordions. We know that his photographs of German colonials and photographs of locals in traditional dress were reproduced in several German journals, but de Brum was never given credit. His most candid shots were of children playing or picking flowers. His depth of field is less shallow, and he usually lowers his camera to their eye level, which provides a sense of intimacy. Photographs that de Brum takes of women weaving, are far more relaxed than the same type of photographs taken by the German or the Japanese, primarily because they are actually weaving and smiling when the photos are taken. German or Japanese ethnographic photos of craft generally show very stiff women staring at the camera with the craft implements in front of them, but they are disconnected from the activity. It is because de Brum was not appropriately acknowledged but appropriated, that his collection is highly valued and protected by his family. Unfortunately, little is known about why Joachim de Brum took the photographs he took. During his lifetime, his son Leonard remembered certain photographs, who the subjects were and where they were taken or the year, and even certain stories surrounding the photographs. His stories were recorded and are now held at the Alele Museum in Majuro under the title “I Still Remember: Leonard deBrum Talks about the Joachim deBrum Photo Collection.” I learned this from Monica LaBriola’s 2013 dissertation, Likiep Kapin Iep: Land, Power, and History On A Marshallese Atoll, who used some of the de Brum’s photographs and relied on Leonard de Brum’s descriptions. However, while these descriptions are incredibly important for the family, it is still different than how de Brum may have approached the photographs himself. In all of his
notebooks, photography is only mentioned once. The surviving knowledge of the photographs therefore rests in the hands of the family, as it should be.

According to Linda Tuhiwai-Smith, indigenous methodology approaches “cultural protocols, values and behaviors as an integral part of methodology” (Smith 1999, 15). In following this, I contacted the members of the de Brum family to ask if I could use any images from the Joachim de Brum collection, even though I have access to view them through the University of Hawai‘i Library Hawaiian Pacific collections. Being in communication with the family, puts research into perspective. I do not have the right to use them just because they are accessible. That access comes with certain responsibilities. The first responsibility being to ask for permission for use.

Overall, images of the Marshalls have been presented through colonial and anthropological perspectives. These photos have gained a much wider circulation and recognition than the de Brum collection because they were repeatedly reproduced in travel and anthropology journals. Several of de Brum’s photos have been incorrectly attributed since the 1890’s. When considering the Marshall Islands, the typical outside viewer has been given sets of colonial fragments and told this is the entirety of a place. By fragments I mean that photographs are ambiguous fragments of space and time, and as a result “fragments come to stand for the whole” (Edwards 2001, 8). Who and what have been left outside of the frame? Tremendous energy has gone into preserving the Joachim de Brum photography collection:

from 2000 to 2004, digitized by Sue Rosoff and the de Brum
Photograph Digitization project through the support of “U.S.
Environmental and Strategic Missile Defense Command (SMDC)
funding, advocacy of the part of U.S. Army Kwajalein Atoll (USAKA) Environmental and Host Nations personnel, an Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) grant, the enthusiasm of Kwajalein volunteers … Marshall Islands Historic Preservation Office (HPO) support, and [the] commitment [of] the de Brum family (Labriola and Hanlon 2013, 1).

As I stated earlier, the de Brum collection is considered the best photographic record of the German colonial period, therefore, although his collection is first and foremost a record of his family and the changes to Likiep Atoll, as seen through de Brum’s eyes, it is also a colonial record. Hence, it is always interesting to note who is at the core of these kinds of altruistic efforts. Quite often they are made by the members of those very countries that are at the root cause of indigenous displacement. Photography and preservation tend to walk hand in hand, and the images that are preserved tend to also shape and inform our collective visual memory. I state this not to critique the efforts toward preservation of these photographs or the agency of the family to share these images with the public; in fact, the family has strict restrictions and permissions on the collection to protect it from exploitation. I raise these concerns to highlight how researchers and scholars gain access to material objects and knowledge that we would not, and sometimes should not have access.

Out of a desire to address the historical issues of photography as a medium within Oceania, the first chapter will attempt to craft a short visual history, whose goal is to present a set of photos that have shaped our visual understanding of the Marshall
Islands. The limits of this format do not allow for a deep investigation into this history but may serve as a baseline for further research. The photographs chosen for this section are selected more for their details and context in history, rather than as serving as a chronological history. By approaching the photographs in this way, I hope to expose the colonial gaze and demonstrate how the work of the Marshallese participants in this project disrupts that gaze and reclaims control of their own images in their own space and time.

**Participatory photography as method**

I approached this portfolio with the intention of facilitating the workshop using Participatory photography (PP) or Photovoice method. The terms are basically interchangeable, but Photovoice is the most common term used. For the sake of clarity, I will primarily use the term Participatory Photography or PP instead of Photovoice. Participatory Photography is a method that supports community members in their use of photography as a creative qualitative research approach for social and environmental change by blending grassroots organizing and social action (Community Health Partnership 2011).

Participatory photography was not created by artists, it has primarily been used by “visual anthropologists, sociologists and education researchers” (Gubrium and Harper, 2013, 69). Since 1997, people have applied the participatory photography method created by professors Caroline Wang, Mary Ann Burris, and Xiang Yue Ping. Wang, Burris and Ping distributed Holga film cameras to peasant women and asked them to take a roll of film each, on themes relating to their health, family and work. They took photos and held focus groups in Yunnan Province. The photo exhibition was
combine with Wang, Burris and Ping’s research and became part of process for policy suggestions for local government and community (Gubrium and Harper, 70). Wang and Burris define this method as “a process by which people can identify, represent, and enhance their community through a specific photographic technique. This method is generally guided by three main goals, (1) to record and reflect concerns, (2) promote critical dialogue, and (3) to impact policy makers” (Wang and Burris 1997, 370). It is an adaptable form of applied or participatory research, that supplies its participants with cameras to utilize as tool for change.

Participatory photography or ‘photovoice’ draws from several methodologies but is primarily theoretically rooted in Paolo Freire’s theory of critical consciousness. Critical consciousness is a popular education method that promotes a deeper understanding of the world and its social conditions to prompt action to change those conditions, resulting in a freedom from oppression (Freire 2000, 174). Freire “used photographs as discussion prompts for workers and peasants in Peru and Brazil who could not read (Singhal et al., 2007). Perhaps, my favorite story of Freire’s participatory photography work is one that rises out of Freire and Augusto Boal’s work with Brazilian child shoe shiners, who they asked to explore the idea of exploitation. “One child returned with a photo of nail on a wall...they learned that the image shows a specific wall where a storekeeper rented out nails where children hung their heavy shoeshine kits at the end of each day”(Singhal et al., 2007). The nail symbolized their oppression and exploitation.

Participatory photography also draws on feminist theory and practice by bringing to light and critiquing some forms of participatory research that renders women
invisible. Participatory Photography should strive to help undo the gender imbalances embedded within the cultural, political, and economic forms of patriarchy.

As is also true in this process, PP is not photojournalism because all the images, themes and subjects in this case, are determined by the indigenous communities, not the researcher. It is also not a news story, it is focused instead on a campaign or issue, and the photographs are tools being used for advocacy. This distinction between PP or photojournalism and news, matters for a variety of reasons.

The primary reason being that this method has the potential to be transformative and healing, to act as a catalyst for supporting Marshallese sustainable self-determination and can be designed to ensure that participants lead the project and are themselves the authorities. Whereas in photojournalism, it is not necessarily community driven, but about the community. PP can serve as an important vehicle for ensuring reciprocity between researchers and participants and if approached ethically, transforms the extractive researcher and subject relationship into a relationship that co-creates research and actions within the community by the community. The goal is to provide an avenue for empowerment that places the researcher in the service of the community, not as an expert or authority.

In participatory photography, “the subjective nature of photography can be a strength rather than a weakness. In using photography to explore and reveal an issue in which they are directly involved, participants capture an eye-witness view of the situation, but also can share their own perspectives as people affected by it.” (PhotoVoice, 2011, 4). Subjectivity becomes a strength here since they are pursuing an issue in which they are directly involved, but more importantly it is provides an
opportunity for Marshall Islanders to illustrate their own humanity regarding how they want to be perceived or how they want to address climate change “by revealing the impact on real people” (PhotoVoice, 2011,4). Photography creates a space for layered literacies. Objects, subjects and lighting within photographs can tell a story outside of words, but another layer is added once a caption or story is added. If you don’t know the Marshallese language, you may be able to understand the Marshallese perspective through the image. Photographs ask you to read the subject, the lighting, the texture, the form, and sometimes the substrate, like a torn corner on an old printed photograph. As participant Leit Kabua states, “seeing it from a Marshallese eyes, if you don’t have language maybe you can have visuals”(Kabua, 2018).

After arriving in Majuro, I met several other foreign videographers, photographers and documentarians invested in the story of climate change. Some videographers that I met also subscribed to participatory photography principles and trained folks on the ground, teaching them a range of techniques, with the intention of leaving their equipment for them to use after they left. They were generous, well liked, good listeners and were developing sound relationships with their participants. While they were not above critique, overall their presence was in service to the community and they were always aware of that.

However, there was another videographer also interested in the subject of climate change on island at the same time, who asked if she could attend and film my workshops. I made it quite clear that this would only be possible with the consent of the participants and that she could only film me and not the workshop participants out of respect for their privacy. She consented to this and participants also consented to
having her present. For the first half of the workshop she respected the process of only
filming the front of the classroom, however, after the participants broke into small
groups, she directed her camera into their faces. Now, normally I would have intervened
immediately, but I also needed to temper that decision so I wouldn’t make the
participants feel uncomfortable or embarrassed in any way. I instead chose to quietly
ask the participants if they were alright with being filmed and addressed the matter later
with the videographer. The error was mine. Although, I was the facilitator, it was not my
place to invite another person in to film or sit in on the process, without clarity on her
intention or use. Although the participants provided their verbal consent, it was also
unlikely, that they would have said no. Throughout my time in Majuro, I repeatedly saw
this videographer filming subjects in this way. The interaction felt extractive and clearly
controlled by the one with the camera in hand. When other researchers, including
myself, tried to address the need for consent from her subjects, particularly minors,
she stated that this was not something that was necessary in her country. I share these
stories to demonstrate just how important it is to be aware of your positionality when you
are a foreign photographer in another people’s homeland, but also to remember that we
as photographers or videographers do not own someone else’s image, it is always their
own. We may be asked to share their image, their story on their behalf, but it does not
belong to us.

Participatory photography can also have unforeseen consequences.
Photography is not an innocent practice. If participants choose to document forms of
injustice, such as police brutality, environmental harm by corporations, conditions of
poverty, etc. their lives may be put at risk. Therefore, the facilitator must be honest and
up front about any possible risks when utilizing this method of research. It is unethical for the facilitator to insist that participants take photographs if they do not feel safe in doing so. Furthermore, photography can be an invasive practice. It is imperative that the facilitator always remain willing to engage in questions of ethics and accountability from the community.

Time is also a factor. Ideally, participants should be provided with ample time to gather photographs to develop their narrative or campaign. The Majuro project posed some interesting time challenges. Participants were only given a few days to take photographs if they wanted to exhibit their works for delegates of the RMI National Dialogue on Climate Change. However, the invitation to exhibit was not made to the participants until after the start of the workshops. This was an unexpected pressure and opportunity offered to the participants that included government support for large format printing. Participants were encouraged to participate, but it was not required. However, that is not say that other unspoken expectations were not in play. It was clear that the organizers of the National Dialogue wanted to have some youth presence and presentation on the closing day of the summit, it was also a generous gesture on their part to invite our workshop participants to be a part of the National and International Dialogues. The facilitators of the conference offered to pay for large scale image printing, something that all the participants wanted, and reciprocity is incredibly important, so even though we had to rush, participants were willing to do it.

For the purposes of this project, participants were posed the question, how do you see home? As community activists already involved in several campaigns to combat climate change, such as coastal protection, waste management, land
management, disaster planning and food and water security. These activists are overwhelmed with images of sea level rise and hopelessness. Instead, they preferred to highlight the positive everyday aspects of their daily lives and their solutions to raise the consciousness of an outside world that is painting them with a single brush of erasure. This decision was made out of an exhaustion with climate change research and documentaries and even art. Climate change does not occupy their every thought, they wanted to show the details of their culture that foreigners never see.

**Toward an Oceania Visual Methodology**

During the late 19th and early 20th century, hundreds of Indigenous people of Oceania were photographed as objects of scientific study or treated as objects to inspire the exotic desires of tourists within commercial postcards. Reduced to savage or erotic beings, the intent of photographers was to illustrate the “authentic” Pacific islander through photographic “evidence.” Many of these photographs became part of the collections of ethnographic and natural history museums around the world. These types of photographs fueled the colonial imaginary regarding the identity and intelligence of the Indigenous peoples of Oceania. Photographs functioned as key colonial devices or rather weapons to promote the subjugation of those outside of the European white male hegemony, because they were deemed to be true representations of the savage/erotic other.

As a key component of Oceania liberation struggles, indigenous peoples throughout the Pacific began to reclaim the rights to their own images & artifacts. Museum curators, archivists and researchers who promote the right of access to the public, became faced with complex issues of ownership and the meaning of Indigenous
objects also came into question. Museums and archives historically acquired many parts of their collections in unethical ways. Sacred objects, skulls, weapons, masks, etc. were acquired from grave robbing or other forms of theft by explorers, botanists and other physical scientists, anthropologists and soldiers. Photographs, on the other hand tend to be sourced in different ways. There are family albums, photography collections, medical, military and government collections that are tied to specific studies and projects, anthropometry and other anthropological collections, tourism photos, etc. All of these also are donated to museum and archival collections through families, private donors or institutions, both public and private. There are photographs that are taken by photographers and agencies who acted or act without ethics. There are currently no strong protocols or protections in place, to guide ethical research regarding photographs of indigenous Pacific Island bodies or sacred objects or places, whether they be anthropological, medical, recreational, posed or without consent. It is because of this troubling history of photography and the rise of mass access through digitization that photographers and researchers using photography must operate within a high level of ethics.

In approaching the concept of an Oceania visual methodology, it must be understood that power and agency wielded by the subjects in a photograph is as important as the power wielded by the photographer. When both the photographer and the subject are of the indigenous Pacific, there should always exist that recognition of agency rooted in a deep respect and understanding of the subjects cultural protocols and permissions.
I argue that there are three key principles at the heart of creating an Oceania visual methodology, for researchers, including researchers of Oceania - (1) the subjects, families, communities, and the lands/waters own their own image and have the right to refuse its use by researchers at any time (2) photographers must respect and acknowledge this agency by adhering to cultural protocols of the community with whom they are working and ask for permission (3) the object, in this case, the photograph, itself has a life. There may be no immediate surviving family members of a person or persons depicted in a photograph, therefore, determinations of use become the responsibility of the community from whom the subject belongs, unless they designate otherwise.

It means recognizing that the right to “view” is not the same as permission for use. It means returning the ownership and management of the images produced in the workshop and on the website back to its participants and therefore to the Marshallese community. It is always important to remember that photography is an extractive process. One only need examine the terms surrounding the medium - “to take a shot,” “to shoot a photo,” “capture an image” to understand that there are inherent dynamics of power built into the act of photography.

In response to seeing a photograph of himself as a young man, Solomon Islander elder Faletau Leve described the experience to ethnographer Christopher Wright in Roviana as: “You can see the shadow of people in photographs. Something remains - it is the echo of things. Your shadow is the photograph” (Wright 2013, 1). The photo he was shown was taken in 1957 during the British colonial administration era by a friend who was Fijian, Maepaza Gina, on a camera that
belonged to Faletau purchased from his first wages as a carpenter. Wright explains, “he went on to tell me stories that are connected to the photograph, stories that bind him and this material object together, as well as tracing lines of connection to other histories and places” (Wright 2013, 1). Wright also describes how the frame for the photograph was built by Leve himself and how the image was intended for his then-girlfriend, called a “love photo” which came out of the time when American soldier were stationed in the Solomon’s during World War II.

Wright engages with this story to promote a certain kind of ethnographic approach that recognizes that a photographic image is related to its subject, that a photograph is a social object (Wright 2013, 2). Leve was taught photography by another man from Roviana, Solomon Dakei, who was trained in Fiji. He posed for this photo of himself to capture “the memory of time” and with the intention of being remembered (Wright 2013, 4). For me this is a story of agency under colonial occupation, at a time when Solomon Islanders and Fijians were considered subjects to be gazed upon. Photography arrived in the islands for the purposes of declaring its inhabitants as savages in the 19th century and then later as a tool of colonial extraction and war. While Wright focuses his concerns on the social life of photographs within the culture, I am concerned with showing the ways that Pacific people have used photography and continue to use photography as a way to reclaim their image from the hands of their colonizers. Pacific Islanders have consistently found ways to outsmart the colonial gaze, by appropriating their technology for their own purposes. I suggest that an aesthetic methodology for Oceania asserts an indigenous agency, not just a social relationship to a given medium. While I deeply appreciate and admire the respectful
ethnographic approach to photography by Wright and Edwards, there is always a missing intimacy, an aspect of understanding that can only be shared among the occupied peoples of Oceania. These nuances that we hold ancestrally and genealogically do not easily translate. Maori scholar, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, touches upon these nuanced understandings in her discussion of insider/outsider research. She states,

The critical issue with insider research is the constant need for reflexivity. At a general level insider researchers have ways of thinking critically about their processes, their relationships, and the quality and richness of their data and analysis. So too do outsiders, but the major difference is that insiders have to live with the consequences of their processes on a day-to-day basis for ever more, so do their families and communities (Tuhiwai Smith 2012, 138).

Unlike Edwards or Wright, as a Pacific Islander, a self-portrait taken during occupation, is a social object, but more importantly it can also be an object of self-determination. These are nuanced differences that surface by paying attention to these subtle cues that might otherwise go unnoticed by an outsider researcher. While I remain an outsider as a non-Marshall Islander, as another Pacific Islander impacted by the legacy of American military and government occupation and harm, I am an insider.

In a Pacific context, a photograph can be considered a symbolic representation of ancestors, sacred places and/or artifacts that are imbued with spiritual mana (power). When a photo is considered to have mana, the concern is not always with who took the photograph or why, but rather who or what is in the photograph or
where the photograph taken. This works in contrast with colonial concepts of objectivity of objects. Susan Sontag argues that “to photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed.” (Sontag 1977, 14). Returning to the importance of recognizing the agency of the subject and the photograph as an object, Sven Ouzman states that objects have “three basic rights: the right to a life history, agency and home” (Ouzman 277). This means that objects have a natural life cycle of coming into being and decay, that they exist within a relational context that is often tied to a people who have appropriate knowledge of its use, meaning and care. In terms of agency or the expression of individual power, the object is a fragment of a culture through which we may glimpse an “honest view of material and human agency” (Ouzman 280). But photography complicates some of what Ouzman is stating. Photography is a Western form of technology, and photographs were generally not from source communities or made by group members but by a foreigner, who took the product, the photograph, with him as he left. Therefore, I would argue, regarding historic photographic images, that it is the content of these objects - the people, sacred locations and artifacts that have agency. The photograph or photo negative is the container of agency. By this I mean, the subject or place or object within the photograph has agency and it is contained within the frame of the photograph. However, the agency of the subject is not lost if it is reproduced mechanically multiple times and distributed, but what is lost is the context of that subject’s agency. A skull is a discrete tangible object and belongs to a human with a genealogy and belongs within the context of a culture.
So let’s consider the photograph of a skull(s). A photograph is usually not a discrete object, it can be reproduced, made into a postcard, framed and mounted, etc. Once a photograph is created and distributed, it can exist almost anywhere, without any controls by the subject, the family or community from where that photo originated. That is why it is more difficult to argue for its rights as an object, because images reproduced have multiple life cycles, multiple relationships and multiple homes. Therefore, when Pacific people place specific restrictions or limitations on what is allowed to be photographed, how it can be shared, etc., it is important to respect those boundaries placed by the family or the community as a core principle of an Oceania visual methodology. In those cases where there is no clear line of authority or permission, quite frankly, they must remain out of the eye of the public, until the community determines its fate. There are larger issues of handling and storage of objects, that I do not have time to explore because it has more to do with concerns of preservation and conservation, rather than a visual methodology.

**The Problem with Photography**

To understand why this photography project is important, we have to understand the visual context that it is rupturing. In Chapter 1, I will take the reader through an extensive non-linear visual history of the Marshall Islands. The Marshall Islands has primarily been photographed and seen through German, Japanese or American eyes. Through these colonial perspectives, the Marshallese have been seen as savages, amenable savages, nomads, naive, children, victims, and burdens. Their lands have been seen as small, remote, sparsely populated or empty. This continual belittlement and erasure by colonial of the Marshallese people and culture has caused generational
harm. It has served as the justification for the most horrific of human violences to be visited upon the Marshallese people, who have endured German and Japanese assimilation, two world wars and most horrifically nuclear testing in which the Marshallese were treated as non-consenting human test subjects for radiation poisoning. Therefore, every image produced by the Marshallese to contradict these images is an act of political agency. This agency can only be understood by understanding how long the colonial eyes have spent looking at the Marshallese without seeing them.

**A closer look**

In chapter 2, I will conduct a close reading of a few photographs from the Aelõõ in Aiboojoj exhibition and share reflections from interviews conducted with a few of the participants that encapsulate the simple elegance of this project and the ways in which the participants stories and images contradict the dominant external narratives of the impacts of climate change in the Marshall Islands. While close readings will take place within the first chapter, the second chapter will have the benefit of knowing the photographers, their intentions and apprehensions in this process.

**Aelõõ in Aiboojoj**

I will close this portfolio with Chapter 3 and discuss the events leading to and surrounding the exhibition, the exhibition itself, and the future of Aelõõ in Aiboojoj. I will primarily focus on the larger discussions of economy, food sovereignty and sustainability that participants engaged in within the National and International Dialogue summits. I will also share the stress of pulling together an exhibition on a limited budget within the span of 5 days for a primarily government filled audience.
At its core, this portfolio is based on relationships that I would describe as *wehena ʻole*, inseverable. It is not inseverable based solely on the friendship between me and Kathy, but also because of a profound sense of kuleana I feel to her 'ohana and to her people as a Kanaka Maoli. The hospitality, generosity and patience of the people of Majuro, humbled me deeply. I had arrived without language or a deep understanding of the cultural nuances and protocols, as I should have, but I was never made to feel unwelcome or shunned, but gently corrected as needed. Hawaiʻi which could have been *puʻuhonua* (sanctuary) for the rimajel (Marshallese) after the fallout of nuclear testing by the United States, has failed to be a site of healing or welcome. The Marshallese in Hawaiʻi have often been mistreated and harassed and made to feel as a burden, many times by Kānaka Maoli. This is shameful and unacceptable. We as Pacific peoples cannot afford to turn our backs on one another in the midst of rising tides. When we act and behave as our occupiers, we shame our ancestors. As Kānaka Maoli, we have a responsibility to restore and heal these damaged relationships. It is my hope that in some small way, this work has honored the Marshallese people.
Chapter 1: Never Seen

Let’s begin with the premise that a photographer does not own the image of the subject. That our own images belong to us. That a photographer, ethically only has the right to share that image with the permission and full consent of the subject. Let us also rely on the premise that a researcher doesn’t have the right to access the photographs unless they also receive consent, either from the subjects themselves or their family or the community from which they come. What if we also assert that this agency extends to objects, to land, sky and seascape as they relate to sacred sites? It is not enough to simply acknowledge your positionality to a subject or even within a community as a researcher, we must also consistently problematize our right to access the knowledge of others, this includes their image.

Kanaka Maoli scholar, Noenoe Silva writes, ”ʻĀina is our ancestor and our sibling; our human ancestors sang to and about the ʻāina. Everything, including the rains, winds and stones, is imbued with life”(Silva 2017, 172). Her words touch upon the respect that is needed when approaching indigenous land, but I would also include seascapes, as our concept of land extends along the seafloor and the waters where we fish.

A Marshallese story that expands on the concept of ʻāina as ancestor imbued with life can be found in the story of the two sisters, Liwātuonmour, who had gone to Nāṛo Atoll on Nāṃo island and Lidrepdrepju, who had gone to Aur Atoll on Aur island, are embodied as two basalt pillars on the reefs of these atolls. They are defined by Marshallese elder, Alfred Cappelle as “Eban jako. Permanence.” Eban jako means It will never be gone. (Jetnil Kijiner 2014,65.)
Tobin’s *Stories of the Marshall Islands: Bwebwenato Jān Aelōn̄ Kein*, as told by Ėlamān and Jekkein in Majuro 1955, tells us that Lidrepdrepju remains but Liwätuonmour was cast into the sea by a missionary (Tobin 2002, 54). It is said that Liwätuonmour was “a guardian of the people [and] brought irooj back to life. She is not there now” (Tobin 2002, 53). This missionary, Dr. Rife, held no respect for the embodiment of Liwätuonmour in the lagoon waters of Aur, although he was clearly threatened by it. This missionary removed an image from the Marshallese sight, because just seeing this dekā (stone) threatened his vision of God, without realizing that the removal increased her importance and she now lives on in minds and hearts of the Marshallese. He did not acknowledge the agency that this dekā held and as a result she can no longer be met by the curious hands of rimajel children, the way that Lidrepdrepju continues to be. She can no longer be seen against the sky. The dekā of Liwsuonmour is a sacred object, that then makes the reef and the surrounding land a sacred site. All of it is imbued with life. This is what I mean when I say our land has agency, because it is infused with our stories and “the truth about stories is that’s all we are” (King 2004, 92).

A photograph may not be truth, but it can tell a story and our relationship to it as an object informed by our belief systems, our cultures, our economies, our gender and our values. I argue that to struggle with the ethical use of photographic images, to ask permission of a people, of a place, is a good problem to have as native researchers in Oceania. It is good because it upsets a world in which access to photographic images has become so excessive that most are now void of context and meaning. Our images should have meaning, but that meaning is gained by engagement and permission. To
take this position challenges how we have come to conduct research. It challenges the ideas of photojournalism, that demands the need for images to tell a story. Researchers and libraries and museums are constantly striving for greater access for the public. But why should we as the public, or researchers, or the state, have the right to the images of others without their consent? It is easy to argue that there have been many photographs produced that have worked in the service of social justice and have documented injustice. Some photographs pose a threat to the state. For example, well known American photographer Dorothea Lange’s photographs of Japanese internment were suppressed in the U.S. National Archives. Linda Gordon in her book, Impounded: Dorothea Lange and the Censored Images of Japanese American Internment, writes about the suppression of these photos and reflects that “A photographic record could protect against false allegations of mistreatment and violations of international law, but it carried the risk, of course, of documenting actual mistreatment” (Gordon 2006, 21).

When we learn of suppressed images that can provide a fuller sense of history, this increases are our concerns regarding other documents that are being kept from us by the State. These slow leaks of images are also a form of slow violence. By slow violence as they relate to images, I mean that the State chooses to slowly release images that would cause its population a great moral distress and provoke demands for justice, in order to normalize extreme violence over time. So that when faced with a more complete picture of violent events, we are encouraged to move forward, because these are things that happened in the past, a past that goes without redress.

It is unclear what connection Lange had to her subjects, she was working for a federally funded agency, the War Relocation Authority at the time of the internments.
But her relationship to the military was an antagonistic one. “She was constantly denied access to what she was supposed to photograph” (Gordon 2006, 20). Her photos posed enough of a threat visually to the Army that many images were impounded for years even after the war. The goal was to provide proof that her subjects were not being mistreated in the midst of a race based forced migration at the request of the state, but Lange’s photographs revealed the agency of her subjects and risked appealing to the collective conscious of American citizens. “They wanted a record but not a public record” (Okihiro 1991, 267).

Now those same suppressed photographs are available for purchase by the public, shared in exhibitions and viewable on the internet. It is important that the families and even the general public be given the opportunity to see the systematic harms that were implemented by the state. But I argue that it is the surviving families that should determine the rights of that access. Let us not forget that these photos hold the private lives of those who were stripped of their citizenry and their humanity, so perhaps they should not be reduced to WWII wall art or screensavers. I believe that the survivors and their descendants of Manzanar and the other internment camps, have a right to individually and collectively determine access to the images of their families, most especially when these images become commodified. Perhaps, this is a decision that has been collectively made by those families. But it is not a decision that should be made by the Bancroft Library or the state archives or the Army or even those in charge of Lange’s estate, without the consent of those families.

Consent is the primary issue at the crux of ethical handling of photographs. Photographs held in trust, do not equal commercial access. It comes down to issues of
control and power. Therefore, we as researchers, scholars or activists must constantly advocate to ensure that the communities we work with have control over their own images, whether ethnographic, political, cultural or social, human or non-human.

That brings us to the core of this chapter. While piecing together a photographic visual understanding of the historic and contemporary ways that the Marshall Islands has been seen or not seen by foreigners, control and power is a constant theme. Ethnographic photographers throughout Micronesia went out in search of the “authentic native,” and as a result “defined and selected, in terms of subject-matter, what was to be preserved. In other words, they had the power to authenticate” (Edwards 2001, 160). Edwards touches on an important point in her phrase “the power to authenticate.” She goes on to say, “there was an authenticity of observation that defined the authority of the scientist and anthropologist” (160), therefore, credibility was given to the foreign observer and not the Marshall Islander to determine what constituted the original native and what was culturally true. If the scientist determined the authentic native was unclothed and savage, then the clothed Christianized native could not be authentic because this presentation interferes with the scientist’s authentic determination. Regardless of the fact that missionaries were consciously welcomed to Ebon, by the peoples of Ralik and Ratak, converted out of their own choosing, and determined to wear the western made clothes. None of this was considered authentic. Authentication could only be determined by the observations of non-rimajel.

Colonial occupiers used photographic images of anthropologists, to prevent the Marshallese from defining or representing themselves. Photographic representations of the Marshall Islands as a colonial outpost, as an anthropological lab, as a military
proving ground, as a tropical getaway, and now as a disappearing landscape due to rising sea levels, all try to erase rimajel agency.

**Lasting Impressions**

The United States began its nuclear testing program in June 1946. Sixty-seven tests were conducted until August 18, 1958, each documented by aerial and ship photographs and film. There are three photographs that I have selected showing the oceanic, terrestrial and atmospheric impacts of nuclear testing. Each photograph has been taken by/for the U.S. Military for the U.S. Department of Energy, Atomic Program. Each image has been reproduced many times, in newspapers, magazines, television and film. I have selected three for what they signify not just physically, but psychologically and spiritually.

The first well known photographic image of atomic testing, was taken around the Bikini Atoll and codenamed the “Baker” shot. This bomb was detonated underwater and was equivalent to a 21-kiloton bomb. Secondly, the world’s first true hydrogen bomb, codenamed the “Mike shot,” was detonated during “Operation Ivy” and produced a crater 6,240 feet (1.90 km) in diameter and 164 feet (50 m) deep, completely vaporizing the island of Elugelab, belonging to Enewetak atoll in 1952, removing it from earth and returning it as nuclear ash. The last image is the largest bomb in history, Castle Bravo. It was detonated near Bikini Atoll on March 1, 1954. An atomic device the equivalent of 1,000 Hiroshima bombs. Jeban Riklon recalls that day, “Burn skin peeling off of people. Nausea and diarrhea...vomiting...peoples’ hair falling out... all of that happened to me at the age of 2” (Horowitz 2011, 11:25).

In March 1946, a writer for the *New Yorker*, E.B. White wrote:
Bikini Lagoon, although we have never seen it, it begins to seem like the one place in the world we cannot spare, it grows increasingly valuable in our eyes - the lagoon, the low-lying atoll, the steady wind from the east, the palms in the wind, the quiet natives who live without violence. It seems unspeakably precious, like a lovely child stricken with a fatal disease (White 1946, 17).

White provides a disturbing view of the attitudes held toward the Marshall Islands post World War II. For White, the Marshalls was an unspoiled paradise in a world that does not know violence, completely ignoring the facts that Marshall Islands had been involved in two world wars. The natives, the land and the water are viewed as quiet children. There is a condescending paternalism to this perception. White equates the atom bomb with a fatal disease, as if it cannot be prevented, as if the bombing was inevitable. But most importantly, this writer explains quite blatantly that Bikini was not seen. To not see a space or a people, allows a space for violence and justifies a violence that would not be sanctioned in the place of a valued people. As was mentioned in my introduction, during the Cold War Era, there was a consistent narrative being produced describing the Marshallese as happy amenable savages, who had become Christianized. This narrative was repeated to place the Marshallese outside of the realm of modernity, incapable of self- governance, or capable of understanding atomic science. The truth was that no one understood what was going to happen, but they knew enough to know they were placing the community in permanent exile. The Marshall Islands were chosen as a test site precisely because they had little to no political recourse under the Pacific Trusteeship to prevent the testing, rendering them
outside of civil society. The Atomic Energy Commission worked to offer up the Marshallese as the sacrificial lamb to reassure American citizens that they had nothing to fear. Kanaka Maoli scholar Iokepa Casumbal-Salazar writes,

> early colonial encounters where the conflation of technological achievement and human worth functioned to expel the Native from the categories of rationality and civility. Constructions of modern man reinforce the inside from which the Native is expelled, signaling a threshold and outside to modernity (Casumbal-Salazar 2017, 19).

The decision by the United States to test the capacity of their new atomic “science” in the Pacific Ocean and to also use Marshall Islanders as test subjects to study nuclear fallout, rendered the Marshallese and the reefs, the fish and the waters of the Pacific outside of humanity. To take photographs under these conditions also raises the question of the moral threshold of the photographer. To witness and mark through light on paper the active destruction of an ecological system and a homeland, is to also stand somewhere outside of humanity.
The first image, the famous “Baker shot” from the Jack Tobin Island Anthropology collection,¹


Figure 2: “Baker’ Shot, Operation Crossroads: 21-kiloton underwater detonation,” 1946
Source: Jack Tobin Marshall Islands Anthropology Collection

has handwritten notes on the front and back of the photo by anthropologist, Professor Jack Tobin. At the time that this photo was taken 167 people lived in Bikini and Dr. Tobin was working as “anthropological field consultant by the Civil Administration Unit of Naval Operations. During the Trust Territory Administration era, he served as the sole district anthropologist for the Marshall Islands, a position he held through 1957” (Jack Tobin Collection 2010, Home page). The photo above, came into Tobin's collection and was taken by an unknown or undocumented photographer. It was located in a file folder labeled "Kili/Bikini Photos 1968 HICOM Trip Return Survey Bikini & 1952 Official Photos" (Tobin Collection Bikini Ref #0583, 1946).

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¹ Photographs from this collection are for academic purposes only.
While the photographer is unknown, Tobin placed his own name on the photograph. On the front and on the back, he wrote *Personal Property of Jack Tobin* to assert that this image is part of his personal collection. The top of the photograph also gives us a location and year and the notation, *A-Bomb Test.* This is a military document, *forensic,* that Edwards describes as having a content of ‘reality’ (Edwards 2001, 87) and a personal memento that exists outside of the context of the individuals it is directly impacting. This photo is an object that has an ontology marking a moment in history that changed the Marshalls forever.

While the photo shows destruction, there is also life in this photo. In the foreground there a coconut trees and wooden structures. There is an ocean exploding. There are signs of humanity, without people. However, the position of the photographer is behind the island, at eye level with the sky. The atmosphere is filled with ocean and coral and ash. The explosion does not look like a mushroom, but a massive tree with a tremendous trunk. The sepia tone and the note that was written and then scratched out in blue ballpoint pen, implies that there was more information that the viewer is now denied. Currently, sepia toned photographs signify the past, it conjures nostalgia. Nostalgia invokes attempts at establishing state and settler innocence (Rosaldo 1989, 108) that longs for the simple life, while blowing up the ocean. At the time that this photograph was taken it signified the dawn of the atomic age and the sepia tone was did not imply the past but the present. Therefore, the nostalgia that may have been conjured by this photo in 1954, would have been a colonial longing for a paradise lost, a land they destroyed. The Marshallese did not lose an imaginary paradise, they lost their land, their homeland. *Nostalgia* literally means “to return home” and “a painful condition”
or rather a homesickness (Rosaldo 1989, 108). Imperialists can always return home, because what they have destroyed is usually in a space that they claim but for whom they do not belong, and their pain is temporary. The people of Bikini, Rongelap, Utirik, and Rongerik are in permanent exile, made sick by the violence visited upon their home. Nostalgia means something very different for them. 167 people who were considered nomadic by the state, meaning somehow not tied to their lands, were asked to give up their home “for the good of all men” for a powerful “new god” (Goin 1991, 8).

I did not select this image to question or interrogate Dr. Tobin’s intentions in keeping this image or even claiming it as his own, but to talk about how much meaning this 28cm x 21cm image holds. It is a signifier of colonial destruction and human loss. This is the beginning of a drawn-out nuclear genocide. All of this is held in this small space. It is a marker of post-war nostalgia and an attitude toward a people that are never seen.

The second image, the “Mike” shot taken during “Operation Ivy” by the Navy is available through the U.S. National Archives, Activities and Personnel of the Department of Energy and Predecessor Agencies, 1955 -1979, created by the Department of Energy, Office of Public Affairs. This photograph fails to show the crater
Figure 3: “Operation Ivy, Mike cloud aerial view,” Oct 31, 1952.
Source: U.S. National Archives, Department of Energy. Office of Public Affairs. Identifier 558592;

that was left by “Ivy Mike.” It was an experimental thermonuclear device, that was a surface detonation with a yield of 10,400 megatons (Patrosian-Husa 2005,11). Although the bomb was exploded on the surface of the island of Elugelab, this image depicts a god’s eye view, from a plane. Unlike the 1946 Baker shot filmed from a Navy carrier, this is far above the ocean, far above the land and far above the people of Elugelab, who were relocated to nearby Enewetak Atoll and witnessed the explosion. This photograph does not show destruction, its shows a change in atmospheric conditions in full color. If you did not know what it actually is, you may consider it a beautiful
photograph. From this photo no one could tell that it was the result of a device that carved a hole in the sea and removed an entire island from the earth. You cannot tell from this photo that it produced a fireball whose radius extended two miles from its center. It is a reality submerged, an absence of a whole culture (Edwards 2005).

In a declassified film on U.S. nuclear testing, “0800012 - Operation Ivy, Parts 1 and 2 (1952)”, Elugelab is described as a “small naked island” and this one shot is described as “10 megatons...four times more power released in this one shot than from all the explosives dropped by the entire Anglo-American air force used on all of the German occupied countries during the last war” (talkingsticktv 2007, YouTube 58:06). At no time during this film are Marshall islanders referred to or seen; all damage impacts of the blast are compared to the harm it could potentially cause in a major city in the United States and the size of craters caused by the bomb is measured by its relation to fourteen pentagons (59:05). No life is recognized or valued in the Marshall Islands. “Ivy Mike” is clearly designed to illustrate power and a show of American force. The narrator has a certain calmness when referring to ideas of “complete annihilation” (59:32) and when he innocently asks, “the day after tomorrow, who knows what these Pacific sands might see?” (1:02:03). Through this narrator, the US is implies that it is only the sands that absorb the impacts of weapons testing, not the people. But the Marshallese people absorbed those radiated sands into their bodies. There are other photographs of the “Ivy Mike” shot that are more destructive. There are Navy photos of the crater. But I have selected this cloud shot because of the hubris and godlike stance that it implies. Nuclear weapons testing that is capable of disintegrating an entire island, can never be made clean again. The atmospheric shot removes the eyes from the puncture in the sea.
and gives them a view of the heavens. A viewer examining this photograph without a caption or context, may not know that it is an image of force so devastating it turned a storied homeland into radiated ash. A viewer examining this photograph with caption and context may instead see an image of power unchecked.

The last of these nuclear shots, and the one most burned into my memory is the 15 megaton “Bravo” shot, part of Operation Castle detonated on March 1, 1954. It shot a “fireball of intense heat 20 miles up into the sky at the rate of 300 miles per hour, creating 100 mile per hour winds that carried the radioactive cloud over 7000 square miles of ocean” (Goin 11).

Figure 4: "'Bravo' shot, Operation Castle," March 1, 1954.
Source: Commission for the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty Organization
This is a photograph of a burning sky. Unlike the “Ivy Mike” cloud that sits within a blue sky beneath a radiant sun, this is fire. In a 2018 poem titled “Anointed,” Jetnil-Kijiner writes,

There is a legend of a shell. Anointed with power. Letao used this shell to turn himself into kindling for the first fire. He gave this fire to a small boy. The boy almost burned his entire village to the ground. Licks of fire leapt from strands of coconut leaves from skin and bone and while the boy cried Letao laughed and laughed.

Here is a story of a people on fire – we pretend it is not burning all of us. Here is a story of the ways we’ve been tricked, of the lies we’ve been told:

*It’s not radioactive anymore*

*Your illnesses are normal*

*You’re fine.*

*You’re fine.*

My belly is a crater empty of stories and answers only questions, hard as concrete.

Who gave them this power?

Who anointed them with the power to burn? (Jetnil Kijiner 2018)

While this poem is in reference to Enewetak Atoll and the bombing of Runit and Elugelab, the feeling of these words are captured in the image of the “Bravo” shot. All three of these atomic photographs are photos of permanent displacement, of ecological and biological devastation, of a violence that the atmosphere cannot contain. However, this is only known outside of the frame of the photograph. This knowledge rests within
our moral threshold. These photos are not about what is being shown to you, what the eyes can see, but instead the attending values, histories and morals that inform the image. These photos are images of destruction based on the idea of an empty landscape, of empty sands and waters that wash away the acts of violence.

**Weaponizing Belief**

Believing that they were going to provide a great service to humanity that would “end all world wars” (Wyatt 1946), believing they were going to return home, the people of Bikini Atoll left their homeland for Rongerik, under the direction of their Irooj Juda, who declared, “We will go, believing everything in is in the hands of God.” The U.S. weaponized the faith and trust of the people of Bikini, using their own humanity against them, to test weapons of mass destruction. Then the U.S. military documented the process to demonstrate its own humanity.

It is this documentation of relocation that is so insidious. The photograph above and many photographs were taken by *LIFE magazine* photographer Carl Mydans. He was sent to document the exodus in February of 1946 and created a photo essay that was published on March 25, 1946. The title of the essay, “Atom Bomb Island” opens...
with the image of U.S. Navy LST ship with the back of woman carrying her belongings toward the ship and three children running toward the camera. Three quarters of the frame is filled with the eminence of the ship. The Marshallese are diminutive in the foreground.

![Image of Atom Bomb Island, March 25, 1946](LIFE p.105)

Figure 6: "Atom Bomb Island," March 25, 1946 Source: *LIFE* p.105

The article informs the reader that, "No one quite knows what will happen to Bikini after the bomb is dropped except that there will be very little left of it" (*LIFE* 1946, 105). It goes on to say,

They told *LIFE*’s Carl Mydans that they would come back to Bikini someday. The Navy may have to run special excursions to Bikini after the explosion to convince the people that they can never live there again (105).
The United States knew they were going to destroy a homeland forever and used the islanders’ faith in God to do it. The hubris and violence of this is overwhelming. The photo essay calmly anticipates an annihilation. Other images in the article show irooj Juda and his family and a group of islanders, being lectured to by Commodore Wyatt. They had been summoned after church to explain the evacuation project. Another photo showed a man marking the number of coconut trees he will need to be compensated in Rongerik and another showed native children in trees with the caption,

From Pandanus Tree: children look out curiously at the vanguard of the U.S. fleet lying off Bikini. This tree together with the coconut palm, is a mainstay of island life. Natives eat its fruit which tastes like a combination of mango and banana. They use its dried leaves for shelter (107).

Figure 7: “Island People Leave for Good of Man,” 1946. Source: Life, Carl Mydans
Captions like these promote a kind of primitivism of the natives and an omniscience of the Americans. Photographs like these reinforce images of white supremacy and American imperialism that require destruction and genocide for the greater good. Photography for the American military worked as a tool of propaganda to reassure the American public and to threaten the Soviet Union, who were building their own weapons.

I would like to put this image in conversation with an online New York Times image from an article titled, “The Marshall Islands are Disappearing” that was published on December 2, 2015. The article discusses the current climate change crisis and rising sea levels. It also discusses the Marshalls’ current relationship to the U.S. Military.
This photograph is disturbing in that it bears a striking resembles to the “From Pandanus tree” photograph taken by Mydans 69 years earlier. The children seem to be “looking out curiously,” except this time it is at the Ronald Reagan Ballistic Missile Defense Site on Kwajalein. Considered a militarily strategic location for the U.S., 900 Marshallese workers from Ebeye take a ferry to work on Kwajalein every day, where 1,200 American military and civilian personnel “launch missiles, operate space weapons programs and track NASA research supported by an annual budget of $182 million” (Davenport 2015). While the military moved to fortify Kwajalein with expansive desalination and specialized sea walls, Jenrok in Majuro, lost ten rows of graveyards to sea level rise. The U.S. seems to demonstrate an ongoing marginalization of the Marshalls but expect their loyalty and reverence to the American military. That is seen Mydans’ photograph captioned, “Raising the American flag in Rongerik” (Mydans 1946, 108).

Figure 9: “Raising the American flag in Rongerik,” 1946. Source: LIFE, Carl Mydans
The full caption that accompanies this photo states, “the new island is slightly larger than Bikini, also has more palm and pandanus trees but there are fewer neighboring atolls”(108). Together the photo and the caption imply that the people of Bikini should be grateful to the U.S and salute its flag. Even though the US had not conducted a full survey of Rongerik to ensure that it was fit to sustain a population of this size. The people of Bikini were moved from Rongerik to Rongelap, but due to the refusal of the U.S. military to delay the Castle Bravo test because of a shift in wind direction, the people of Bikini suffered the largest fallout of nuclear ash from all of the tests while living on Rongelap. They were then taken to Kwajalein to be treated and photographed for radiation exposure and then finally to Kili, that is 1/6 the size of Bikini. The tests of Bikini Atoll shifted from a forced migration to human radiation subjects.
There are two last photographs by Mydan that I would like to discuss. Both bring us back to the beginning of the nuclear testing program. The first is an image that is not well known but was taken during Mydan’s trip to Bikini in February 1946. It was not included in the article. It records a much smaller test than the Baker test, which was detonated before the islanders of Bikini left in March. The bomb was detonated in extremely shallow water and taken very close to the shore. You can see there are islanders sitting on outrigger canoes looking at the blast. This test was not part of the military’s official bombings in Bikini. This photograph pre-dates Operation Crossroads by four months and appears to be an underwater preparation blast. This is nuclear testing next to the island where there are obviously fishing boats, where people are clearly in relationship to the sea and the reef. There is something far too casual about this photograph, and it implicates the U.S. as being casual about destroying life.

The last of Mydan’s photographs also brings us into conversation with today’s current climate crisis. Decades of increasing greenhouse gases, oil spills, nuclear spills and other human-made disasters have caused the world to steadily increase in? global warmth. The result has been rising sea levels, increased and unpredictable storms,
drought, and floods that put the world at risk for ongoing land loss, water and food insecurity, forced migrations and civil conflict. The following photographs combine to tell a story that has been in the making for nearly 70 years.

I put the above photos in conversation with one another, because they both anticipate the disappearance of generations and are frighteningly similar. Both show children playing in graveyards. The first image is just before the Bikinians’ permanent removal from Bikini and the impacts of nuclear fallout. The second is of graves that are being taken by rising sea levels in Jenrok, a direct result of the ongoing destruction of the atmosphere, the earth, and the ocean by the same forces that brought nuclear testing to the Pacific. In Oceania, children at play in a cemetery normally shows a connection to the ancestors and an ease with visiting them. As a Kanaka Maoli, a photo like this photo should fill me with a sense of continuum and the cycle of life. But that is not what the information surrounding these photographs is telling me as a viewer. Rather, these photographs continue both the colonial and anthropological narrative of
the disappearing native. These children are presented as part of a dying race, one that they are eliminating because they are ill equipped to outlive an atomic future. Both images of the graveyard are nostalgic of a place and time for whom the photographers have no ancestral connection. Both images imply a kind of inevitable finality but work against each in that clearly, the Marshallese are still here, despite the many photographs that attempt to make and continue to seek to make them a part of the past. The Marshallese have not only survived, they have found ways to utilize colonial photographs to demonstrate the perseverance of their culture. Photographs taken in the 1890's are now being used as tools for cultural revitalization.

There is Marshallese weaver named Terse Timothy and she was born on Aelōŋlap. She revived the practice of a weaving technique called jaki-ed, by studying a few worn out photographs in the only museum on the island of Majuro. She would stare at the patterns woven into the mat and if she did not get the pattern correct, she would unravel the entire thing and begin again. She revived a nearly forgotten practice by staring at the patterns of worn photographs. The patterns became inscribed in her memory, into her body. She taught other women what she learned so that others may also embody the practice. She learned to weave on Aelōŋlap and that is where she saw the bombs. (Jetnil-Kijiner 2017, Weaving Workshops Reflections II).

Timothy made me reflect on how powerful worn photographs can be and made me seriously consider the role that photographs play in cultural continuity, directly speaking against narratives of disappearance. Originally, I believed these photographs were taken by an unknown foreign anthropologist, purely documenting handicrafts. But it is highly possible that the photographs she studied were taken by Joachim de Brum.
These photographs somehow take on a new meaning knowing that a Marshall Islander, witnessing and engaging in the changes around him, may have felt compelled to photograph ways of life that were being disavowed by the church and colonial administration. De Brum and Timothy are both witnesses to irreversible devastation to their islands, and both took actions to preserve memory and culture to contribute to the lives of their people. Perhaps de Brum could see what the colonials could not: that one day, the Marshallese would need these photographs to find a way for the Marshallese to remember the beauty and complexity that their islands hold in the world.

**Colonial Administrations, the Church and Anthropology**

De Brum died two years before the outbreak of World War II in 1937, when the Marshall Islands were under the colonial administration of Japan. The Japanese Navy sent troops to the Marshall Islands, the Marianas and the Carolines in 1914, at the start of World War I, taking over from German rule (INTOH 1994, 8). The islands were then mandated to Japan by the League of Nations in 1920 (Petrosian-Husa, 2005, 19). The Japanese were interested in exploiting the industries, such as the copra trade, phosphate mining, sugar and the trading of craft goods, in the Pacific colonies that were previously controlled by the Germans. Like the Germans, the Japanese also brought geographers, zoologists, geologists, botanists and anthropologists. The Anthropological Institute at Tokyo Imperial University sent several expeditions to Micronesia (INTOH 1994, 8).

The first Japanese expedition arrived in Jabor in Jaluit atoll in 1915, long after the arrival of the first successful American and Hawaiian missionaries came to Ebon in 1857 with the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM).
Hawaiian missionaries replaced the American missionaries and expanded the missions to Namorik, Jaluit, Majuro and Mili. They established missionary schools, a printing press, and training centers. By 1872, the Marshallese were leading their own congregations (Hawaii Digital Newspaper Project, “Missionaries in Micronesia”). During the German colonial era that followed 1885-1918, Catholic and Mormon churches also became established throughout the islands (Kramer 1938).

This is the environment that three physical anthropologists, Ryō Matsumura, Kotondo Hasebe, and Joukei Shibata working for the Anthropological Society of Tokyo came to document. They produced several photographic collections of their impressions and generalizations of the people of Jaluit. Matsumura produced the most photographs of Jaluit during this 1915 expedition and was primarily concerned with trying to photograph customs, dress and practice, more than the people. He had this to say about the people of Jabor: “Owing to the number of ships visiting the island, natives have lost their former simplicity, and had become cunning from contact with the outside world” (Matsumura 1918, 9). He also goes on to say, “the islanders are generally Europeanized and seldom go naked. This may be due largely to the influence of Christianity” (240). Matsumura’s descriptions have an obvious air of disappointment. His tone implies his wish for a people in their primitive, unspoiled state, as if his presence and his colleagues were not a product of military occupation, and thus the source of their lost simplicity. Matsumura’s attitude is common among physical anthropologists of this era, a longing for a time that they were involved in destroying; a desire to find the “simple” native. Furthermore, Matsumura did not hesitate in sharing his belief that he thought Micronesians were uncivilized and “extremely loose in morals”(93). This belief
was foiled by the people of Jaluit atoll, who were fully clothed and Christianized, since “the lack of clothing for subjects of the Pacific also served as a marker of their native and subordinate status to European, [and in this case, Japanese] onlookers” (Uperesa 2015, 9). Matsumura could not mark them as savage nor promiscuous.

It is obvious that he was only interested in studying the Marshallese for their crafts or style of houses, even their ornamentation, but not the agency of his subjects. Matsumura makes this quite clear while describing this story:

In 1883, several Japanese got adrift on Laë, one of the islands. On the receipt of a report that these Japanese had been murdered by the natives, our government dispatched Môtaro Gotô and Keikun Suzuki to the islands in the following year to carry out an investigation on the spot. At this time it was undecided which country possessed the Marshalls, so they subjugated the native chiefs and returned home.

This quote is significant, because it demonstrates that the Marshallese were never seen as a people who could govern themselves, once they were a possession of another empire. Chiefs were only seen as a placeholder in between empires. The Marshallese chiefs were viewed by Japanese as something close to authority but not valid authority. Indeed, the photographs produced by this expedition often privilege the flora and fauna, the structure or skill, above the nameless human subjects in the photographs. Humans are used merely to mark the scale of another object.

I have selected four photographs that frame how Matsumura’s ethnographic photographs were designed to make the people in them objects of study, but they also reveal a contempt for the photographer, which emphasizes Marshallese agency.
Figure 13: Women grating coconuts at Jabor, Jaluit, 1918
Source: A selection of photos taken in Early Micronesia by Japanese Anthropologists, INTOH
The first photo has two variations. The first caption reads "Women grating coconuts at Jabor, Jaluit." This caption was the description provided by Michiko INTOH in the book, *Early Micronesian Photography taken by Japanese Anthropologists in 1999*. The subjects, although without name, are described as women. The second photo has the caption, "Coconut scraping at Jabor, Jaluit. The *girl* on the right side is astride the apparatus, scraping coconut meat into a basin" (Matsumura 1918, Explanation of Plate XVII). This second caption, written by Matsumura describes his subjects as girls, one being astride an apparatus for scraping coconut meat. The first caption is written by an anthropologist Michiko INTOH, who as a woman writing in 1999, chooses to recaption Matsumura’s original description. I do not know why she
chose to shorten and change the caption, but it does reveal a slight change in perspective. INTOH does something else as well. She selects a photograph in the collection that shows one of the subjects in motion. Not still and behaved. Matsumura who was producing images for an anthropology journal produced controlled images. Whereas, INTOH with access to the full collection chose the same image, but one that tells a slightly different story, one that perhaps shows a resistance to being controlled.

However, what is important about this photograph overall is that it is not a photograph of young women scraping coconut. This is only implied. Perhaps they were scraping coconuts and then their work was interrupted to take a posed photograph. But it is evident that only one person could scrape coconut at a time. So why then are there no less than eight women in this photograph? There are three women in the doorway of the house also in this shot. The five who are deliberately posed, are posed in a very unusual way. Why do two of the women have their hands interlaced and placed atop the heads of two other women? Why does the trunk of the tree feature so prominently in the center of the frame? There is also something else that is very odd in Matsumura’s image of the girl who would otherwise be in motion. As a photographer, he employs the photographic technique of dodging and burning to bring out the details of the tree trunk, and the lighting has shifted on the girl standing on the right, who has a shadow on the right side of her face when it is evident that the light is striking the subjects from the right. Technically, perhaps it is a better picture. But I much prefer INTOH’s selection. Technically it is insufficient. The details of the subjects and the background are blown out and you can tell the subjects started out smiling. They seem to be humoring Matsumura, some returning the gaze of the camera, while another,
stares off with a rather bored look on her face. The photograph that Matsumura
selected, show much more stern, irritated expressions. But in neither version of this
photograph does the viewer learn anything more about coconut scraping, than can be
gained by a written description. In fact, unless pointed out, it is the least noticeable
feature of the photograph. And in this way, the women own their own image and control
the photograph. Without description, it is a photograph of women in an oddly posed
shot. The viewers’ relationship to the subjects in the frame shifts depending on which
variation of the photograph is seen.

The following photo shows a Marshallese house.

![Figure 15: “Plate XIX, Fig.2 -Native house at Jabor,” 1918. Source: Contributions to the Ethnography of Micronesia.](image)

Matsumura provides the following caption for this photo:

Houses in Jaluit are generally simple and small, the roofs are thatched
with pandanus leaves and the walls are also made of the same leaves.
Some houses have board walls, but this is of course rare. The art of house building in Jaluit shows little progress as compared with the Europeanization of their clothing (Matsumura 1918, Explanation of Plate XIX).

The members of this household are being made invisible and patronized in this caption. On the one hand, they are being used to show the scale and smallness of their pandanus roofed home, and on the other, their choice of clothing is being compared to their method of home construction. This caption seems to be conveying Matsumura’s value judgement on this family’s level of progress within a western context, concluding that the architecture doesn’t match the clothing. In this photo, the camera’s depth of field is to capture the whole house and to display the contradictions of the natives. The photograph caption is rooted in racist ideology and again without this caption, says nothing definitive about the subjects, but informs the reader of the subjectivity of the photographer.
The third image centers a Japanese naval officer in the center of a group of Marshallese.

Figure 16: “Men and Women of Jaluit with Japanese Officer,” 1915. Source: A selection of photos taken in Early Micronesia by Japanese Anthropologists, INTOH

This image was not taken by Matsumura, it is most likely taken by either Kotondo Hasebe or Joukei Shibata, the third member of the exhibition. The picture with the officer is back-lit and the officer almost blends entirely into the background. One woman has her hand tucked into the left arm of the officer, but it feels forced because the officer is leaning away from the woman. It is unclear what the relationship actually is between them. They could be spouses and the other people in
the photo are members of her family, or it could just a posed shot with village members. None of the Marshallese, particularly the women look pleased to be in this shot. All subjects are staring directly at the camera including the children. One could argue, that having to stand still for more than two minutes is enough to make anyone not smile. But I do not believe this was the case, because this photo was taken at the start of a Japanese assimilation program and the ways in which the Marshallese subjects are staring at the photographer do not seem to be implying consent but defiance. There are two assertions of power that can be taken from this photo. The Japanese naval officer is central and the symbol of an occupying force. The other is a group of Marshallese staring directly back at their occupiers, unafraid. The distance between the officer and the woman whose hand is the crook of his arm does not provide a sense of ease or familiarity. That slight gap between them is the clue to the viewer that something is not quite right, it feels to me like this was her way of asserting her agency, by creating a distance, however slight between herself and the officer.

The last image is that of woman sitting in the shade of a pandanus tree heavy with fruit.
Figure 17: “A Woman Sitting Under a Fruited Pandanus Tree,” 1918. Source: *A selection of photos taken in Early Micronesia by Japanese Anthropologists*, INTOH

The photographer in this case is unknown. This is not a picture concerned with the life of the woman sitting beneath the tree. She was probably placed there to provide a sense of scale. The ways in which this tree fills and dominates the frame provides the viewer with the impression that this a photograph of a pandanus tree. The woman in the shot is part of the foreground and her face, due to poor reproduction, is too dark to make out her features.

Photographs like these were recurring themes among late 19th - early 20th century anthropologists. I would like to say that there is a difference between the Japanese colonial era and the German era, but sadly there is little distinction. In fact, the main difference during the German administration are those photos taken by Joachim de Brum which range from the intimate to the ethnographic to humorous and curious. Anthropologists Augustin Kramer, August Erdland and Hans Zache often used de Brum’s photos for use in their own publications, but never gave him credit. This is why permissions matter, not to make research more difficult, but accountable.
There is relentless documentation of the same types of activities or poses followed by mechanical reproduction of photographs for science journals or other publications, during both the German and Japanese occupations, with little imagination on the part of the anthropologists. Anthropologists also seem to fulfill the role of documenting the influence of the church, who they regularly cite as the cause of Europeanized clothing. By the time the Japanese arrive in the Marshalls, the islanders look bored or wear expressions of sheer contempt for the photography. Photography was no longer a novelty or a threat, but a nuisance and a tool being used against them to support racist ideologies being applied to them and across Oceania.

This period of intense subjective anthropological representation of Marshallese bodies, culture and landscape shaped what foreigners came to believe was Marshallese “reality.”

World Wars and their fallout

The Marshall Islands endured two world wars. However, there are not many battle photographs of World War I in the Pacific, but there are many photographs to be found of World War II. Colonial posturing and conflicts were occurring among Germany, Australia, England, Japan and the United States, although the United States declared itself neutral. On August 7, 1914, Britain asked Japan for assistance with German raids in Chinese waters. Japan sent Germany an ultimatum, to which Germany did not respond, and on August 23, 1914. Japan declared war on Germany (Mizokami 2014). Between September 29 - October 21, 1914, “under the pretext of hunting down the German squadron, the Japanese fleet occupied all the islands of German
Micronesia” (Hiery 1995, 27), following an attack on Papeete by the German navy. First, they occupied Jaluit, and then moved south to Rota in the Northern Marianas. German colonials had established a kind of mutual respect for the Other in some parts of its colonies, but it was not a balanced relationship. Once the Japanese arrived, the existing pecking order became immaterial. During the German colonial era, the Germans had brought men from Rabaul in the Solomon Islands to work as local police officers. When the Japanese arrived, they wanted to retain them as police. However, the men of Rabaul, refused to work for the Japanese and were sent home (Hiery 1995, 32).

The year between 1914 -1915, Japan sought to understand the resources of the Marshalls. “There was not a house or tree that was not photographed” (Hiery 1995, 131). As stated earlier, the researchers were so focused on what could be extracted, the Marshallese population were hardly noticed. The Marshalls for Japan, at best, represented a site for imperial expansion. As a result, Japan encouraged a steady stream of Japanese settlers to come and populate the islands. The Japanese forced copra planting programs that could result in the loss of indigenous land, if the Marshallese failed to produce, and the Japanese attempted to assimilate the Marshallese into a Japanese way of being by forbidding them from speaking their language both in and out of school under the threat of punishment. German Catholic and Protestant missions were no longer allowed to teach. Toward the latter half of Japanese colonization, the laws of marriage shifted so that a wife could choose her husband, but she would then belong to his islands. This law essentially destroyed matrilineal organization.
An Australian photographer Thomas J. McMahon was impressed with Japanese administration, celebrating their programs of Marshallese assimilation and indoctrination in an article, “The Marshall Islands: Wonderful Work by the Japanese,” he wrote on Jan 1, 1919 for the Sydney Mail (McMahon 1919, 8). In the article McMahon writes,

There is a complete domestic and social upheaval in the Marshalls...The people dress like the Japanese; their pretty manners are quite Japanese; they like Japanese food; and buy large quantities of Japanese tinned food...Japanese schools with Japanese school masters and mistresses, have begun a style of modern education that is giving a most wonderful prospect, and the results that will follow promise to be sound, useful and commercial... The Japanese in short in uplifting these natives have done in four years, and with decided success, what the Germans neglected to do in twenty-five years.
McMahon was vividly anti-German, and deeply racist and patronizing toward the Marshallese. He took “55 photographs of the Marshalls during his travels and used them 76 times in 14 publications” (Quanchi 51, 1997). He was very much a self-appointed photojournalist before photojournalism existed. He was also a product of his time, favoring colonialism and other projects of capitalist exploitation and civilization of native Pacific islanders. He took photos to “legitimize his status as an ‘I-was-there’ commentator and expert (Quanchi 51, 1997).

Two of McMahon’s photographs reveal the influence and propaganda of the Japanese colonial administration. They also serve to fan the flames of the Yellow Peril that Australians, the British and Americans were so threatened by.
This image is captioned *Japanese Dentist at Work: Proud indeed is the native who can display a lot of gold fillings.* (McMahon 1919, 8). At first glance it shows the dental technology of the Japanese who seem to be bestowing a kind of benevolent care and concern for Marshallese health. Upon closer examination, however, this is pure propaganda for the Japanese. Under normal circumstances, dentistry would not take place outside with 15 onlookers. Furthermore, the concern for Marshallese health was rooted in their ability to work the copra fields. “Instruction in health in hygiene was to keep the working population healthy” (Hiery 1995, 151).

![Image of a woman in a Japanese costume](image_url)
The next image speaks to Japanese assimilation methods. Marshallese were required to behave and look as the Japanese, it was more than just a fashion of the day. Images like these reveal a quickly transitioning culture with little thought or concern for the Marshallese own desires. By 1918, the Marshall Islands was very much considered part of the Japanese empire. Colonials that had effectively been pushed out were lying in wait to see who could effectively replace Japan, never considering the option of restoring full governance to the irooj or Marshallese self-determination, even ignoring some Marshallese requests for annexation by another nation. Despite all of this, the Marshall Islands were mandated to Japan in 1920 by the League of Nations under the South Pacific Mandate. This was a result of the Paris Peace Conference and the Treaty of Versailles. Japan’s assistance to Britain in defeating Germany in the Pacific essentially secured their control over German Micronesia and the Shandong Province in Japan. In 1935, Japan withdrew from the League of Nations.

Japan continued to increase its control over Micronesia and by the outbreak of World War II, the Japanese military occupying the Marshalls were a major U.S. target. Photographs of the Battle of Kwajalein and Enewetak in 1943 and 1944 respectively are focused on American soldiers. The landscapes are devastated. There are images of mass death, airplane raids, and sinking ships. The Marshallese have been essentially removed from photographic sight for six years. I do not want to dwell on war images that celebrate American war campaigns, but I will return to images of what remains from those campaigns. During those war years, there were several public relations (PR) photos that were released to show the “liberating American forces” and
the grateful natives. Two photos from Digital Collections of the National World War II Museum show the difference between a PR photo and a candid shot. The first is from the U.S. Coast Guard,

![Image](image-url)

Figure 20: “Coast Guardsman giving a Marshallese woman a cigarette while holding a Marshallese boy,” Circa 1943-44. Source: National World War II Museum.

The Official caption on reverse:

3313. From: Public Relations Division / U.S. Coast Guard / Washington, D.C. / Credit Line Must Read ‘Official Coast Guard Photo.’ COAST GUARDMEN QUICK TO WIN NATIVES’ FRIENDSHIP. Freed from long dominance by the Japanese, natives welcome fighting Americans to the Marshall Islands. Here, Coast Guardsman Joseph Baldwin, Jr., yeoman first class, of 3801 Alton Place, Washington, D.C. presents a package of cigarettes and some candy to a native mother, while he comforts her injured child. Marshall Islands. No date (National WWII Museum 2015).

From this picture we learn the guardsman’s name, his rank and address, and his generosity, but we do not get to know what island he is on nor the name of the name of
the woman or her child. This is how the American is presented—as the “friend of the native, the rescuer.” The second image, “7th Infantry Division soldier speaking with native woman in Kwajalein Atoll” is more compelling primarily because it is taken soon after a battle in the field. There is a rawness to the photo, and in this instance, the viewer learns that the Marshallese woman’s name is Anita. There was an effort made of some kind. Of course, this photograph should be with Anita’s family.

Figure 21: “7th Infantry Division soldier speaking with native woman in Kwajalein Atoll,” 1944. Source: National WWII Museum

The description of the photo reads “Pvt. John DeBernai talking to a native Marshall girl by the name of Anita. 7th Div. U.S. Army.’ Signal Corps Photograph. Photographer: Young. Kwajalein Atoll, Marshall Islands. 31 January 1944” (National WWII Museum 2011). The photo is from the collection of Brigadier General LeRoy J. Stewart. The punched holes and fading scotch tape on the side imply that the photo was pulled from a small album. You can almost feel the dust on her legs and feet. The
photographer is sitting below the subjects with Anita sitting slightly higher and we see her from her feet to the part in her hair. We also see the soldier, but his head is down and in shadow beneath the weight of his helmet. There is a gravity to this photo and each subject is given an equal weight. Every detail stands out—the pencil in his hand, the torn cloth in her lap, the gun leaning against his leg, the wrinkles in their clothes. This is no public relations photograph. This is not a picture of gratitude or benevolence. This is a photograph of two people who may have just experienced something horrific.

In returning to the idea of what remains after war, are the pill boxes and sunken ships, rusted tanks and bunkers. There are also undetonated explosives still embedded along the beaches of many atolls. The rusting detritus of war that goes on to continue to pollute the lagoons, still posing a very real threat, becomes the scars that are embedded in the land and are turned into tourist attractions. The violence of war then becomes fetishized and a “militourism” develops. “Militourism,” a term first coined by i-Kiribati scholar Teresia Teaiwa, describes how the military and tourist industries take on various forms to re-organize native land and bodies to naturalize and justify their continued presence on native land. (Teaiwa 2001). There are many photographs that can be found on the internet by tourists or those stationed at Kwajalein taking photos with remnants of Japanese war cannons or bunkers that are slowly being overtaken by the jungle. Historically, it was the postcard that lured the visitor but now there are blog posts and travel guides that invite tourists to engage with this history. Tourism in the Marshalls legitimizes the military presence, by presenting war as a natural history, as a victory relying on fragments of violence and heroism as part of a marketing narrative.
There is nothing romantic about war, but somehow these postcards and images imply that rust and eroding metal melting into the ocean can wash away its horrors. Images of sick bodies in emergency rooms, still sick generations after the initial fallout foil moves toward imperial innocence. There are no postcards or travel blogs for these images. The tourist industry must sell the image of a Pacific made safe by the military. However, there are still live ordinances on the islands.

**Climate Change and being seen**

Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner brought the impacts of sea level rise to the attention of the world on September 2014 at the United Nations Climate Leaders’ Summit. Performing her poem “Dear Matafele Peinam” brought the impact of sea level rise in the Marshalls to a global audience. Realizing the impact of a visual poem, most of Jetnil Kijiner’s work is now made into video, and she controls the narrative. Other images on climate change have been produced in the Pacific by organizations such as 350 Pacific Climate Warriors, who created a multi-Pacific nation campaign called *We Are Not Drowning,*
We’re Fighting. Together, these powerful images raise awareness and support for addressing climate change impacts on the Marshalls, such as the one below featuring Milañ Loeak.

Figure 24: Milañ Loeak, October 2014. Source: 350Pacific.org

Loeak is still not the photographer; she is the subject, albeit an empowered one. To this day, the majority of images about the Marshall Islands and the impacts of sea level rise are not being made by Marshall Islanders. However, the rise of social media makes photography accessible, organizations like Jo-Jikum, which is Marshallese led and directed make a point of photographing and posting all of their campaigns and events to expand both the message on fighting climate change but also on expanding the narrative on the Marshalls. This is much needed as the dominant narrative on climate change, is one of disappearing islands and climate refugees and forced migration, rather than one of resistance and continuum.
Conclusions

Marshallese bodies, land and seascapes through the apertures of foreign photographers became sites of anthropological study, sites of indoctrination, sites of war between imperialists, proving grounds for U.S. nuclear testing and its devastating fallouts, the site of rising tides and narratives of disappearance. The tenacity and strength that the Marshallese community has developed to adapt to so many foreign desires and assertions, is key to their continuity.

Photography has operated as a weaponized tool of imperial expansion and used to justify the worst violences ever delivered onto a people because they were never seen by their occupiers as fully human. Instead they were labeled savage, patronized, paternalized and neutralized. And at every attempt at erasure, there existed and exists Marshallese agency. The rise of Marshallese artists and activists like Kathy Jetnil Kijiner and the young adults of Jo-jikum finally coming into the frame on an international scale and the narratives about the Marshallese are finally starting to change. The Marshallese are starting to reclaim how they are represented on their own terms.

I have not thoroughly explored the complex political formations taken up by the Marshallese between the years 1947 to 1986 that shifted the Marshalls from a Trust Territory of the Pacific to independence and the Compacts of Free Association. During this time the Republic of Marshall Islands (RMI) continued to fight for reparations, health care and compensation for the impacts of nuclear testing from the Marshalls. There are also images of protest connected with the Nuclear Free Pacific Movement. But many of these photographs still come under copyright and time does not allow for all of the necessary permissions. What is clear is that the need to hear Marshallese voices and to see the RMI through the eyes of the Marshallese remains.
Chapter 2: Changing the Optics

We have learned that photographs exist within a social, cultural and political context. Depending on the context, a photograph may be dehumanizing or empowering depending upon the power relations surrounding the image. The positionality of the photographer, captions describing the photograph, where and how it is displayed and who has possession of the photograph all contribute to the story and meaning of the photograph.

Sontag reminds us that, “gazing on other people’s reality with curiosity, with detachment, with professionalism, the ubiquitous photographer operates as if that activity transcends class interests, as if its perspective is universal.” The danger of the universal is that it becomes the assumed truth. Since the aftermath of nuclear testing and the current impacts of climate change, the Marshall Islands have been pushing back against a political and cultural context of universal assumptions that were historically constructed through photography and colonial propaganda.

The current developing youth movement in the RMI realize the necessity to reframe the narrative of the significance of the Marshall Islands but also the need to reframe the optics of the Marshalls. All of these factors demonstrated the need for a photographic method whose visuals were presented entirely from a Marshallese perspective. Furthermore, in photography that is also tied to campaigns for social justice, powerful visual representations help to reframe the issue. Therefore, in this section, I want to build off the understanding that “we need to use images, metaphor, visualization and the five senses to illustrate what is important in the story” (Center for Story Based Strategy 2019, #Show Don’t Tell).
The organization Jo-Jikum offers a variety of art as social justice opportunities for youth and young adults in the Marshalls. As a grassroots organization they seek and encourage creative ways to develop a range of social and climate justice campaigns. As a result, several artists specializing in skills such as spoken word, mural painting, podcast production or documentary filmmaking have been invited to work in Majuro to support their work. The “Majuro Photography Project,” that I offered to facilitate this summer, is part of this social justice art practice. All of this works to reframe the narrative and image of the Marshall Islands, it also pushes both the local and global community to act on issues that impact all of us, most recently, climate change.

In this chapter, I will conduct a close reading of five photographs by Alma Cappelle, Fern Lehman, Leit Kabua and Matol Beasha, and Danielson Tawoj. Four of the photographs were presented at the Aelōň in Aibojooj exhibition in Majuro at the International Conference Center during July 2018. The fifth, by Tawoj should have been presented in the physical exhibition but arrived too late to get to the printer on time, however it is included in the workshop website, that will be discussed in the last chapter. This close reading will demonstrate the ways a Marshallese perspective conveys a different narrative of intimate relationships to the seascapes, landscapes and subjects. It is the subjectivity of the photographers that show a valued and storied homeland, rather than disappearing islands. Their photographs are in conversation with the photographs of Joachim de Brum through ancestral connections to homeland and culture. The images provide the beginning of a type of optical restorative justice, as these young photographers reclaim how their community represents themselves.

**The work of Alma Cappelle**
When the sun rises and shines through my window which turns the cool air in my room to warm. The smell of my favorite flowers - Kajdro and Meria. The smell of the salty air in the evening and the cool air blowing through my soft warm skin. The beautiful view of the sunset. The loud waking voice of my mother in the morning. The neighbor’s laughter in the day. The smell of the Barbeque when driving to town.

- “How I describe home,” interview with Alma Capelle, July 2018

I begin this discussion of Alma Cappelle’s photographs with the above quote because it provides a wonderful description of her relationship to the light and air, smells and textures, and the sounds and elements of Majuro. There is a fullness to this description of an entire day that you can feel. Reading this I can feel the heat on my skin, smell the combination of salt and flowers in the air. I want to taste the barbecue, hear her mother’s voice and her neighbor’s laughter. There is a verticality to this description that rises from the sea to the sun in the sky and all the spaces in between. There is a delight and love of place in Alma’s work that is best seen in her photograph Happy Little Flowers in Paradise, featured below:

Figure 25: Alma Cappelle, "Happy Little Flowers in Paradise," featuring Carnie Reimers, Jeita Peter, Jorim Sam and Wilmina Reklom.
Immediately you can see the world that Alma describes. Her friends are laughing, surrounded with her favorite flowers in their hair and in the surrounding bushes. There is an intimacy and trust in this photograph. This is not a photo taken away from the community but belonging to the community. Alma wanted to highlight the beauty of nature in the islands, “I define the beauty of nature and people when [they are] surrounded by the fresh smell of the flowers” (Capelle 2018). Her perspective comes through clearly. It is interesting that none of the subjects are looking at the camera, the bodies, while posed are still relaxed. There is no sense of impending doom, but a group of women enjoying their afternoon.

Another of Cappelle’s photos in the exhibition show Carnie, Jeita, Jorim and Wilmina on a beach in Arrak Weto. Cappelle chose the beach because part of the land has been taken by the sea and she thought it “was important to show this to the people, in case they hadn’t noticed it yet” (Cappelle 2018). Cappelle chose that site not for strangers to notice the erosion, but for her own people who may not be aware. This is a way of seeing that is entirely different from foreign photographers. It is about a conversation among islanders without caption about climate change, without shouting, this is climate change.

I find Cappelle’s work incredibly empowering and affirms a “refusal of the ongoing victim narrative that neoliberalism creates” (Simpson 117). When asked what role she feels photography will play in the future of the RMI, Capelle replied, “the photos will show, in the future of the RMI, the importance of the great transformation of our home, or islands, and its history” (Cappelle 2018).
In relationship to climate change, Cappelle wished she could have added more in terms of showing community efforts to reduce waste. “I would have liked to add to my project how we reuse our trash, such as plastic bottles and plastic bags and make ear flowers, head flowers, and so much more” (Cappelle 2018).

**Relationship to Nature: The photographs of Fern Lehman**

Fern Lehman was raised in the United States. She is a part-time science instructor in life sciences & climate science at the College of the Marshall Islands, and a mother. She also makes videos for women on ‘green beauty’ and wants to show the beauty of the Marshall Islands. She returned home to start a family. She describes her relationship to home as “mostly from memory, when I was a child and now, as an adult, trying to figure out life with a child. I feel like I am learning language like a kid. I am getting socialized to living here” (Lehman 2018). Lehman wants people outside of the Marshall Islands to know that more people migrate for economic reasons and education, not climate change. “We are just everyday people living here. And making the most of it and we are not preoccupied with climate change”(Lehman 2018). I find Lehman’s words refreshing and a reality check, that climate change is one among many factors impacting the economy and well-being of the Marshallese.
Figure 26: Fern Lehman, “Sunset States,” 2018.

Her work *Sunset States*, Lehman says was a “matter of being in the right place at the right time. “it looks like an image of images. It’s not difficult to get a photo of a beautiful sunset, so I wanted to make sure it was different.” *Sunset States* is indeed different and captures both the beauty of the sunset and the realities of climate change in a nuanced way. Through windows of a building that is in the process of erosion, possibly abandoned due to damage from king tides, we see the setting sun through the window on the left and rain clouds in the distance on the right. Lehman asks us to look deeper past the erosion and into the seascape.

We have beautiful things, it's not all climate change, trash and erosion. I like to think that we have something positive to motivate others, so we want to save it. If we always show the negative than why save it? Images of nature are important. Our relationship to nature and seeing beautiful images gets us to pay close attention and to really look (Lehman 2018).
What draws me to *Sunset States* is how the viewer is looking outward from the Marshalls to the horizon. The eyes are drawn to distinct elements of nature, a place that is in fact eye level with the sea. There is also a balance between sun and rain, light and dark, soft and hard, land and sea, wet and dry. This perspective shift brings to mind the Hawaiian practice of *kilo*. To *kilo* is “to watch closely, spy, examine, look around, observe, forecast” (Pukui-Elbert 2003, 151). Lehman’s photograph asks us to examine and watch closely to the beauty in the details.

Another of Lehman’s works, titled *Defining Shapes* presents the viewer with two simple images. The *jaki* or woven pandanus mat and a rattle. “It really captures my experience now in this place. And my son is trying to understand the world in this place. The jaki is a shape that defines this place and a rattle defines a baby” (Lehman 2018). Once again Lehman plays with texture and form and asks us to embrace a deeper meaning in simplicity. Lehman’s photographs are the visual stories of return to home and finding what that means for herself and her son. “No one really fully understands that identity is based on where they were raised” (Lehman 2018). In this statement Lehman reminds us of the role that land, and culture play in identity formation. When asked what role she thinks photography plays in cultural collective memory, she had this to say,

It’s interesting, because it is so easy to take a photo now, and we rely on it for our memory and its affecting our memory. I have memories that I only know through stories attached to a photo. I find myself recording my life here. I Record my kid, or some song, or capture things. It’s really easy. It must be affecting how we are holding onto things.
If one day the islands become uninhabitable and they are forced to migrate, Lehman believes that photos will be some of the most important sources for remembering, but for now she says, “Conserve what you love.”

**All that Glitters: The images of Leit Kabua**

Leit Kabua had just graduated when I met him, and he was preparing to move to Hawai‘i to start his undergraduate degree in the Academy of for Creative Media program at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa. There is a kind of epicness to Kabua’s photographs in his use of light and depth of field. His work discusses the importance of recycling, but there is also a humor and playfulness to his images.
For example, Kabua’s photograph titled, *Green Flash* is playing off of the time of day when the sun is setting and dips just below the horizon, at that moment there is supposed to be a green flash of light. But here the “green flash” comes from a group of green Heineken bottles and wine bottles being struck by the afternoon sun. Kabua tells me this photo shows several things. First, the photo shows us bottles that are collected to be cleaned and used to collect coconut juice and secondly, this is a photo that represents the summer “to take people’s minds off the [the idea that] we’re drowning. These bottles show the memory of a party of relaxing and the gathering of family, but it is also about the importance of recycling. (Kabua 2018)
Kabua makes the bottles as important and prominent as buildings or trees by coming down to almost ground level with a shallow depth of field. This makes the bottles significant, almost larger than life signifiers of human celebration and consumption. Had Kabua not told me that the bottles in this photograph were going to be refilled with coconut juice, I only saw the remnants of a party that were beautifully lit. But why this photograph works, is because I felt compelled to ask why did you select these bottles to photograph? But more importantly, when Kabua wants to remind people that “family is all around us” and parties and relaxation are a way of life here (Kabua 2018).

Kabua’s states that photographs are “visual textbooks” and he turns to the work of Joachim de Brum and says, “if you look at Joachim de Brum in Likiep atoll and you see that they were wearing missionary clothes. You see the difference between then and now. Photos are visual textbooks” (Kabua 2018). Here Kabua returns us to the concept of photography as a tool of history, as having a place in time. He goes on to say that the role that photos will play in the future of RMI is like something out of the film Back to the Future.” It would be like a timeline. Like a DeLorean. Back to the future” (Kabua 2018). But Kabua is also mindful of how different photographs will convey different stories, he goes on to say, it depends on if they are political photos or sad photos of kids starving in black and white up close” (Kabua 2018). Here we see Kabua’s understanding of film and photography and how it can be used to invoke emotion or sympathy. In his own work, Kabua paid special attention to his use of color and perspective for this project. He found the process of focusing on details as all part of the fun. His photograph Glitters and Glimmers, shows a glittering lagoon and the entire
frame is filled with water. A photo of sea and light that is simple and mesmerizing. It is not a daunting sea but waters that are well known to the photographer, as if the he were sitting in a boat on the water one afternoon.

Kabua brought a lot of visual curiosity and photographic experience to this project and when asked how if photography is a worthwhile tool for cultural memory he said,

Yeah. Cuz we are taught orally and visually. We are a hands-on culture, You can’t just be told how to do it. Our best workers are always touching things. That’s how they know how to fix engines. Always touching and then you know what your touching.(Kabua 2018).

This quote brings together the importance of how the oral, the visual and the tactile are fundamental to Marshallese ways of knowing. Kabua put a tremendous amount of the thought into his photographic process and focused on the details. “Home is details. It’s all the little details you know and all the details you find out and they become your details” (Kabua 2018).

**Matol Beasha: Our Culture**

When Matol began taking photographs he focused on Marshallese culture. His photograph simply titled *Culture*, shows a community centered dance, called *biit*, one line for men and one line for women that is performed at large events, especially at Christmas. This is one of Beasha’s favorite photographs because it ties him to his community.
All of Beasha’s images are of community, two of the *biit* and one called *Teamwork*. The photo titled *Teamwork* is just students in a classroom at the College of the Marshall Islands (CMI). No one is looking at the camera. The position of the photographer is behind the speaker. There are at least forty students in the room and there is a mural that runs the length of the wall on the left of the photo. The mural is of the atoll and is primarily painted different shades of blue for the waters and the sky and
there are small islands on the horizon. It is a photograph that in many ways is not immediately gripping or especially dynamic.

However, what is interesting about this photograph is unless you were at this gathering, the viewer has no idea what it is about. We can see that there are place cards on some tables in bright colors with numbers on them, there are two students in the foreground with open laptops and the window shades are drawn. There is a projector that is turned on at the top of the frame but there is no PowerPoint or other visual presentation that can be seen and there are two students standing in the back of the class poised as if they are going to give a speech. Yellow, red and green balloons are taped to the wall, seemingly left there from another event and never taken down. Many of the students are looking down at their phone, or talking to each other, or bored, sitting in white plastic chairs beneath white plastic tables. The instructor, who has his back to the viewer, may be giving instructions or is getting ready to hand them out. The scene is just an everyday classroom. That is what I love about it. I love that it is not concerned with climate change or being beautiful, but about them working together in a classroom. It is just a photo about everyday life and the mundane small details of it.

**The Humor of Danielson Tawoj**

Daniel was probably our funniest participant and works with the media department the College of the Marshall Islands. He contributed this photograph titled *Best Catch* for the exhibition, but the images had already gone to print by the time I received it. He did not provide any kind of description for this photo, but it is probably my favorite.
There is a very large swordfish hanging by a thick rope from a tree center frame and there is a little girl in a multi-colored zig zag dress, smiling with her left hand holding a fin and the other tightly holding a baby doll. Behind her are two visible turquoise colored water catchments and a large tree. There is something so funny about this image. The fish is slightly bloody, very sharp and tough looking. It is not something that you would want to caress, and the little girl is holding the very tip of the fin. Yet, she still seems comfortable with the fish, as if she is used to posing with fish of this size, almost as if she had caught it herself. The little white baby doll is being held almost like a security blanket. There is a perfect balance of soft to sharp and heavy to light. The
swordfish weighing down and holding the center of the frame while the girl, also holds
the center of the frame but making it less severe. She appears to be a little girl proud of
her daddy’s catch.

It is also exciting to see such a large fish with so much meat on it. You can
envision the freezers packed with the meat in anticipation for the next party. Seeing this
little girl reminds of all the children that I saw in Majuro, playing and laughing freely on
the beaches, swimming in the lagoon, walking down the road, in neighboring yards, at
the churches. The children were always laughing. Outside of the Marshalls we are
never shown a picture of happy children, just being children. Instead, the media
presents us with children and graves, children beneath a looming military installation.
This photo negates all the doomsday optics of children with an uncertain future. This is
a photo that celebrates a way of life, a people who still know how to live on the land and
happiness. Another aspect of this photograph that is also important are the water
catchments, that are slightly rusting at the bottom. The water catchments are the reality
check in the photo, that prevents me from romanticizing or fetishizing living off the land.
The water catchments remind me that fresh water is vital for survival, that they are
necessary for living on atolls. This photograph is brilliantly framed, because it shows me
a true love and reality of place, even if that was not the intention of the photographer. I
can tell almost immediately that the photographer is rimajel because the little girl is
looking at the photographer directly with trust. The viewer cannot help but smile or
laugh when seeing it.

I could spend hours describing the photographs that came out of this small
photography workshop. Each photo gave me some new way of seeing and
understanding the people of Majuro and its environment. Yet, I knew that I was only scratching on a tiny, tiny part of the surface of this place. The photographs that I have selected for this close reading are based on wanting to provide just a small cross section of the participants. Alma Cappelle, Matol Beasha, and Danielson Tawoj are students at CMI, while Leit Kabua was preparing to come to school in Hawai‘i and Fern Lehman is a teacher and mother who returned home. I was drawn to these photographers because each one has a passion for photography and were especially enthusiastic about this project. They also all presented images that presented their homeland in beautiful and thoughtful ways. Each photograph had many layers, either addressing political issues such as climate change or recycling or food sovereignty, but all of them were celebrating their culture. The visual story that the group presented collectively, was a political act of reclaiming their own images that completely counteract the presentation of a migrant race on the verge of collapse.

Alma Cappelle said it best, “Participatory Photography has given me the opportunity to share my own perspective and express my aspirations ... so that I can inspire and lead new initiatives for people to improve their situation” (Cappelle 2018).

**Chapter 3: Creating Aelôñ in Aiboojoj and its future**

In this chapter, I will discuss the development of the photography workshop, titled “The Majuro Photography Project,” hosted and promoted by Jo-Jikum, the process for developing the themes for the project, the political environment surrounding the workshop, the production of the exhibition, Aelôñ in Aiboojoj and the following website. I will also discuss the potential future of the Aelôñ in Aiboojoj website.
Preparing for the Trip

A few months before I arrived in Majuro, I met with Kathy Jetnil Kijiner to discuss the goals of the project, how to promote the workshops, determine the age of the participants, and determine the size of the workshops. We also discussed technical needs and other logistics. We originally decided on a two-day workshop that would provide cameras to the participants, providing them with a very basic training on the technical aspects of photography and the camera features and then a day discussing potential themes for a project exhibition, if the participants wanted an exhibition.

After the initial workshops the participants would have two weeks to photograph and select images along the theme of the project. We also settled on having the age of the participants be 18 years or older to expedite the process and avoid the need for parental release forms. Also, because the participants were being given cameras, we wanted to ensure that they would be able to properly care for the equipment. All of our participants could speak and read English, however consent forms were provided in both Marshallese and English, since for some English was a second language. If I were to do it all again, I would not have proposed this project without learning Marshallese, which I believe would have made the process more dynamic and may have increased the number of participants.

Kathy offered to sponsor the workshops as a project of Jo-jikum. The workshops would be included as part of Jo-Jikum’s summer workshops. However, while climate change was discussed in the photography workshops it was not the main focus. As a visual artist and photographer, Kathy and I had often discussed the best ways to bring me out to work with the members of Jo-Jikum and the community. Arriving as both artist and researcher was a challenge. As an artist, I am primarily interested in the process of
art making and the connections made through collaboration. But as a researcher I am most concerned with ethics and respecting the community so that their voice is stronger than my own, because so much research has been extractive and harmful to the community. It was important that the community felt empowered in some way by this project. Research expects you to arrive with a research question or clear set of questions. But as an artist, I asked myself, how could I know what questions to ask before I arrive? So Kathy and I settled on a very simple concept that the participants could take many directions. I also sent her a bio of my previous work as an artist to share with potential participants. The flyer that was sent out invited the viewer to “Tell the Story of your Homeland in Photos.”

Jo-jikum began promoting the workshop about a month before I arrived. The flyers went out on their social media page and at the College of the Marshall Islands (CMI). They created a sign-up form that requested a two-day commitment to attend the workshops at CMI. Originally, I was informed that sixteen participants committed to do
the workshops. I purchased sixteen AKASO EK7000 Sports Action cameras, to give participants the opportunity to take photographs underwater or to take videos if they liked. I packed the cameras into a suitcase and arrived on a flight with Kathy and her daughter, Matafele Peinam on July 11, 2018.

**Arriving in Majuro**

The Majuro is visually stunning. The airport reminded me of landing on Maui in the 1970’s when you still stepped off the plane onto the tarmac and all of your ʻohana was there to greet you. The sky was clear, and the ocean really is eye-level with the land. I love that the road divides the land into lagoon side or ocean side and that there are children laughing and playing everywhere. I am not saying this to be romantic nor am I calling it paradise. It must deal with the burden of militarization and industrialization at a level disproportionate to its size. It is a place that must figure out how to dispose of waste, and ships decaying on the reefs, and all of the other legacies of their history I have already mentioned. I arrived in a place that did not deserve what the world has done to it. I say that Majuro is visually stunning because in Hawaiʻi we are no longer told that the Marshalls are beautiful and it needs to be said, repeatedly. I thought of all of these things as we drove from the airport to Kathy’s house, while Matafele Peinam looked at the new pop-up book given to her by her jimma (grandfather).

**Politics on the ground**

We arrived only a week before the 2nd National Climate Dialogue being held from July 19 -20, at the International Conference Center hosted by the Republic of the Marshall Islands government and the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC) Partnership. This was immediately followed by the Marshall Islands Partnership
Dialogue, also co-sponsored by the NDC Partnership from July 22-23. The NDC Partnership was created out of 2015 Paris Climate Agreement. The Paris Climate Agreement, was agreed to on December 12, 2015 and opened for signature on April 22, 2016, by the parties at the 21st session of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change Conference of the Parties (UNFCCC COP21), with the intention to,

- strengthen the global response to the threat of climate change by keeping a global temperature rise this century well below 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels and to pursue efforts to limit the temperature increase even further to 1.5 degrees Celsius. Additionally, the agreement aims to increase the ability of countries to deal with the impacts of climate change, and at making finance flows consistent with a low [Greenhouse Gas] GHG emissions and climate-resilient pathway (UNFCCC Paris Agreement, nd).

According to the UNFCCC Climate Change website, The Paris Agreement was a “landmark agreement to combat climate change and to accelerate and intensify the actions and investments needed for a sustainable low carbon future.” By 2017, 125 parties signed on to ratify the agreement and since 185 parties out of the 197 Parties to the Convention. However, on June 1, 2017, the United States withdrew from the Paris Agreement and immediately stopped implementing its nationally determined contributions (Zhang, et al 2017, 220). NDC’s which were not binding, but required that all Parties report regularly on their emissions and on their implementation efforts. There will also be a global stocktake every 5 years
to assess the collective progress towards achieving the purpose of the agreement and to inform further individual actions by Parties (UNFCCC Paris Agreement, nd).

At the time of the United States withdrawal from the agreement, Donald Trump as newly elected president maintained strong ties with fossil fuel companies, who strongly backed his campaign. Trump was also urged to leave the agreement Republican senators who had benefited greatly from oil, coal and gas interests (Zhang, et 2017, 221). Since this withdrawal, Trump and the Republican Party have been systematically repealing environmental regulations, particularly former President Obama’s Clean Power Plan (Jotzo, et al. 2018, 814).

Despite these setbacks, the NDC Partnership, currently has seventy-six-member countries and twenty institutions working with governments to help them reach their NDC’s through long term strategies for funding and capacity building. Space does not permit for a full analysis of the impacts of the withdrawal of the US or the current state of the Paris Agreement, but I have noted it here to provide the political context leading into the NDC Partnership Dialogues that were occurring in the Marshall Islands in July of 2018.

The photography workshops were scheduled to take place on July 17-18, just two days before the talks. I accompanied Kathy to a meeting regarding her role in the dialogue and when members of the planning committee learned about the photography project, they invited our participants to potentially hold our exhibition at the close of the talks. A tremendous honor in that our participants were being given the opportunity to showcase their representations of the Marshall Islands as a homeland for an
international body of delegates, but also unforeseen tremendous pressure to produce a body of images for the international community within six days.

The climate change dialogues were not the only activities occurring during our time there. On July 17, the results of the Marshall Islands Climate and Migration Project were being shared at the International Conference Center (ICC). The purpose of the project is to try to “understand the role of climate change and social conditions on the migration of Marshall Islanders” (Burkett 2018). The project is led by a group of migration and climate experts. Presenting the findings of their project were principle investigator Maxine Burkett from the William S. Richardson School of Law, environmental lawyer, Kees Van Der Geest, and Marshallese environmentalist and councilman, Mark Stege. A fourth member of the team, Juno Fitzpatrick was not able to be present. In 2017, The project surveyed 200 households on Majuro, Maloelap Atoll, and Mejit island and their migration patterns from the RMI to Hawai‘i, Washington and Arkansas. One of the preliminary findings, from a sample size of 40, concluded that a large number of respondents viewed migration as a successful migration strategy, while another 62% of participants living in Hawai‘i would return to maintain cultural ties (Burkett, Kees, Fitzpatrick 2018). All of the preliminary findings on Marshall Islands Climate and Migration website. The findings are not directly related to this portfolio and I do not have the space to critique or go into depth on these findings, but I include this report back to show the kinds of contemporary research and conversations that were occurring within and about the RMI during the time of the photography workshops.

As I mentioned in my introduction, there were also a few documentary filmmakers on island. Two were working from a participatory documentary film
framework, by providing the participants with filming equipment and leaving the equipment with them in Majuro. They were also living on island for a year and had time to develop relationships with the community. I learned the source of their funding and their ethos. In brief time that I had met them, I heard much about them very quickly and it was positive. They were there to make a documentary about sea level rise and its impacts, but they were taking the time to develop a deeper understanding of the people and the place. There was another filmmaker, who did not subscribe to the same ethics. They were only going to be there a few weeks. She often filmed youth, without parental consent or written consent of any kind, it was unclear where or how her footage would be used. When another colleague suggested she seek written permission from their subjects, they said that this was not something that is usually required where she is from. It felt completely extractive, even though she believed the filming she was doing was respectful and ethical. Both sets of documentarians were going to tell stories about the Marshalls and climate change, but two were doing so with a higher level of care and ethics, while the other, was just doing what she wanted. All of them were at the National Climate Dialogue filming, along with other professional media groups. All of these politics and narratives at play provided an interesting backdrop for the workshops.

**The Workshops**

Before the workshops began, I went to meet Wilbert Alik, who had translated all of my consent forms into Marshallese back April 2018. He is not only a translator, he is a keeper of Marshallese stories and I wished I could stay and talk with him, but I was grateful to have the opportunity to thank him. The first day of the workshops was held at CMI in the old library on July 17. The old library was just a large open classroom, next
to the media center. I finally got the opportunity to meet our participants. The number of participants was reduced from the original sixteen to twelve. Some participants already had their own cameras, but most did not and were excited to be given a camera.

Figure 31: Timmy Itaia, Chris Sebastian and Boh Launit with their new action cameras, photo credit: Jina David

We opened with a round of introductions and I asked what participants what drew them to the workshops and what they hoped to gain from these workshops. Several of the participants who came to the workshop also worked with the media center, others came out of curiosity, while others had a passion for photography, but all stated they had a desire to show their own story in photos. The participants also worked in a range of professions, most were students or educators, but one was a policeman, or rather an officer for the Port State Control, the government body that protects the harbor and regulates shipping vessels. He was an unexpected surprise and added another interesting perspective to the workshops. Since we only had a few hours together each day, we jumped into the heart of the workshops rather quickly.

We opened with a discussion on ethics and photography and what it means to be control of their own image. I also explained that any exhibition, or other format that
came out of these workshops were entirely their decision and intellectual property and I explained that my role was to support them on the technical aspects of photography and to support them in whether they wanted to show an exhibition at the dialogue talks or not show anything at all. I stressed my role as facilitator was only to help them actualize their hopes for the project, even if that meant they didn’t want to share their work at all.

I also informed the participants of the opportunity to showcase their work at that the NDC National Climate Change Dialogues and that they were under no obligation whatsoever to agree, given the incredibly short notice. However, the participants appreciated the idea of being able to show their work at something so important and also liked the idea of have large scale prints of their photos, being paid for by another source, because printing is quite expensive. Since they agreed to participate and were eager to do an exhibition, we began discussing possible themes right away. I put up some butcher block paper up on a whiteboard and the participants began to suggest themes.
We broke the participants into small groups to discuss possible themes and names for the exhibition. Some of the suggested themes were:

- Adapting traditions to modern life
- Showing home - the beauty of small things
- Staying Positive - Why we want to sustain our lives here
- Showing the world who we are because people don’t know about us

Some of the images that participants wanted to share within these themes were sharing the culture, their people, their environment and commitment to repurposing recycled materials, their crafts, and their relationship to the sea.
Out of the themes they came up with a wide variety of names. I must admit this exercise was one of my favorite parts of the workshop. Each small group suggested a name and at the end, they all voted on their favorite one. The name suggestions were:

- It’s a beautiful life
- Joy and Beauty in the Marshall Islands
- A Day in the Life
- Eyes of the Beholder
- Aelōñ in Aibojooj (beautiful small things)
- Showing the Positivity of Home
- Small Island, Great People
- Freedom
- Our Islands
- Our Home
- Erosions
- Struggles
- Positive & Negative
- Beauty of the Island

“Aelōñ in Aibojooj” received the most votes, but surprisingly “Freedom” had the second highest number of votes and I could not quite understand why. No one provided a reason beyond “I like freedom,” to which the group collectively giggled.

Once the theme of beautiful small things and its corresponding name were agreed to it was much easier to move toward the more technical aspects of the project.
The next day I talked about the different features of the camera and the technical parts of a photograph. We discussed different apertures, the ideal time of day to shoot for the best light, depth of fields and how that impacts an image, subject, composition and content. The who, how and why of a photograph to put it simply. What I forgot to do was to show them how to shoot at in large format and to remember to save them in an archival format known as Tagged Image Format (.tif). This reminder came in a panicked request after I started receiving the first images intended for the printer. On the second day, we also briefly revisited ideas of ethics. I reminded them that if they were going to photograph people, to ask for their subject’s permission and their names so that they could be included in the caption because we have a responsibility as photographers to respect someone else’s image, especially since these images were going to be exhibited. Several participants were shocked by this level of responsibility, but also appreciated it because they were not used to photographers doing this in the Majuro. They were used to people just taking their picture without being asked. It was not only important that they reclaim how they are presented to the world, it was also important that they understood the responsibilities attached to that process, as photographers,

Ramping up

I met with the participants on Tuesday and Wednesday, they only had until Sunday, July 22 to take photos and email me copies so that I could get them all to the printer by 11 am Monday, July 23. That did not include the easels or the mounting boards that were going to need to display the photos. It was a bit manic.

While the participants were out taking photographs, I was allowed to attend the National Climate Change Dialogue.
Over the course of two days, the conference discussed climate change science and projections, sector impacts and responses, adaptation and resilience, mitigation of greenhouse gasses, community experiences, and climate leadership, which included a youth panel led by Marshallese climate justice organizers. Members included A.J. Alik from the #HaveYourSei Campaign, a climate warriors justice declaration that was brought to COP23 in Bonn, Germany to demand a move to 100% renewable energy and the Reimaanlok Project, a local marine fisheries management program, Bryant (B.J.) Zebedy who attended the COP22 in Morocco for #CallOnCOP campaign, which was the precursor to the demands sent to Germany and he was also organized the
#PacificPawa campaign in September 2018 to continue the push for renewable energy. Other panel members were Cansecho Carmel and Brandon Nathan who are both Earth Champions working to find solutions for solid waste management and recycling and Kristina Reimers works with the Environmental Protection Authority and traveled with Kathy and B.J. Zebedy to the Vatican Conference on Climate Change. All of these young organizers utilize video for their campaigns, and they work with larger organizations such as 350 Pacific to make sure their message is heard and reaches a wide audience. These youth engage social media in their work and is helping to change both the message and the image of the Marshall Islands for those who know very little about their history and contemporary life. They are powerful leaders utilizing visual technology to challenge previous representations of the RMI and to demand climate justice.

On Thursday, July 19, I was asked if it would be possible to show a small preview of images that would be in the exhibition at the close of the youth panel on Friday! Luckily three of my participants had already sent in their first photos, so with the help of Jo-Jikum project manager, Jina David, at lunch on Friday I rushed over to the printer and had three full color large format photos made. I was able to return in time for the youth panel and three of the members graciously offered to walk through the conference center with the preview images as a teaser for the exhibition.
The pressure was beginning to ramp up and I was left with just two days to gather the rest of the photos in time for the printer, including titles and names.

There were a number of high school aged youth who attended the dialogues, who were attending as part of Climate Change Leadership camp that was going to take place immediately after the dialogues on July 24-25. Their presence at the dialogues were important because at times they asked more grounded thoughtful questions than their adult counterparts. When climate scientist Chip Fletcher, from the University of Hawai‘i proposed dredging islands as the most viable single solution, calling it “adaptation” (Fletcher 2018), it was the high school youth who asked why he was
selecting such an extreme and expensive solution. The director of the Climate Change Leadership camp is Angela Saunders, from the International Organization for Migration, Head of Sub Office Marshall Islands, Mission Gender Focal Point, and she was gracious enough to arrange a set of easels for the exhibition. Normally I would have just mounted the images to a wall with some simple mounting. But in this situation, because we were in a government building, we were not allowed to hang anything on the walls. Hence, easels it was going to be.

In the meantime I reached out to participants to ask if they would be willing to be interviewed to discuss the process of participatory photography, including their thinking behind the photographs they selected and what role they think the photographs they created will have in informing cultural memory in the future. A few consented and we scheduled times to meet in the week following the week exhibition.

**The Day of the Exhibition, July 24**

The deadline for participants to send a high-resolution photograph in .tiff format was Monday morning by 11am at the latest, to get it to the printer and printed in time for the show. Nearly everyone got their work to me in time for the show, but there were a few that came in too late to be printed on time. I will forever be in debt to Ellen Milne-Paul of the Office of Environmental Planning and Policy Coordination for her support in facilitating funding for the printers. Her work behind the scenes was vital to the success of the exhibition. Food was also provided for free for the exhibition and closing reception by the NDC partnership members. The generosity was overwhelming.

The easels were brought to the ICC and let’s just say they were a bit dusty and in various states of disrepair after being kept in storage for a while. However, being the
resilient island people that we all are, we were able to cobble together enough working easels to mount the work. However, there had been another glaring detail that we had forgotten. Easels are just open stands and the photographs needed to be mounted. So Kathy ran out and bought all of the display boards that she could at EZ Price Mart. In the meantime, I was printing out the labels for the show with names and titles for the photos. The youth that were attending the Climate Change Camp, came out to help us set up for the show. Kathy returned with boards, the youth helped me put together the easels and mount the photos onto the boards. I scrambled to attach the labels to the board and before I knew we had what ended up becoming a full-scale community exhibition. Honestly, I wouldn’t have wanted it any other way.

As an added and unexpected bonus, two of the youth educators from the organization, RMI Youth in Health, Brighten the Rainbow Project, who were training the youth at the Climate Change Camp on gender and identity education, also happened to
be spoken word artists. They offered to perform some of their work, along with Kathy to open the exhibition. Everything came together in such an organic way. It was not a fancy exhibition, but it was an important exhibition because it was led by and for the Marshallese community and it showed international visitors how the people from the Marshalls actually see themselves and their land.

The exhibition was warmly received by not only the delegates that were involved in climate change talks but more importantly by the high school youth who attended. The participants were proud of their work and were excited to see it at such a large scale. Ellen Paul-Milne managed to have the work show at the ICC for a full week, so that government officials who were holding meetings could see it and it could also be viewed by the outside through the large plate glass windows. I watched as the security guards walked through the gallery of photos and office staff members that came out to look and I wished that I could have had more time to work with the workshop participants to produce more work. But upon reflection, I think that there was a serendipity to that photography workshop that would not have been nearly as interesting had it occurred after or before those climate talks and youth summits and report backs.
Photography is about capturing key moments in time. That is exactly what these participants did.

**The future of Aelðñ in Aiboojoj**

Following the exhibition, Jina David held the work for participants to pick up at their convenience. He also returned the easels. I began a few interviews with participants, and I sent out an email to each of the participants to see what they wanted to do in terms of next steps. All of them wanted the images placed into a website. I offered to set it up and then hand over the management of the site to any participant who wanted to take it on. Chris Sebastian, who works at the media center at CMI offered to manage the website. It took me much longer than I wanted to set up the site. But once I completed it, the participants were pleased, and I sent the management link to Chris to add to or change the look of the site. It is possible that the website may not ever be updated, or it might serve as a way of communicating with the rimajel diaspora. The decisions rest entirely with the community. I have attached an appendix of the images of the original site at the end of the portfolio.

Before I left Majuro, I got a chance to go to the Alele museum where the photos of Joachim de Brum are kept. There are two images that stayed with me from that visit that I will never forget. The first was a portrait of Irooj Kabua, sitting in a chair on a porch, in a dark suit, with a fedora in his lap and white patent leather shoes. The image stays with me because he reminded me so much of the portraits of King David Kalākaua, from the way he combed his hair to his mustache and sideburns. It made me really consider how these two leaders wanted to present themselves. We know that Kalākaua utilized photography as a form of resistance to US colonization efforts.
(Maxwell 1999, 192). It is possible that this was true for Irooj Kabua. Now after seeing all the ways that photography shapes the perception of a culture, I am convinced that there were many constructions of identity and performance of identity for photographs to assert how the Marshallese viewed themselves.

Another image that stayed with me was a picture of Irooj Lejitnel’s son. He is perhaps ten years old or so in the photograph, wearing a white collared shirt, against a dark cloth background. The boy is standing center frame and staring directly into the camera. He is frowning and not smiling but there is something so powerful about that stare. As though he is a man staring out through a child's eyes. This portrait is completely unlike the photographs of children in the Aelőň in Aibojooj exhibition, where children are laughing and jumping. There is something haunting about the boy that stays with you.

In the short time that I was in Majuro, I learned how much I did not know, how much had been kept from me and I understood more than ever what Kathy and Marshallese community is fighting to save. It is not a place for the west to arrive with its discourses of rescue, but rather a place that deserves collaboration and reparations. It deserves and demands western accountability. It deserves to be seen and the Marshall Islands are in a position to determine what that means for their land, for their waters and their people.
Figure 38: Aelõñ in Aibojoj Artists: Front Row from left to right: Boh Launit, Alma Capelle, Joy Enomoto, Fern Lehman, Kathy Jetnil Kijiner, Kelly Sebastian; Second Row from left: Junior Kaisha, Darren Joji, Danielson Tawoj, Francis Lenja Jr., Matol Beasha; Back Row from left: Leit Kabua, Timmy Ataia, Chris Sebastian, 2018
Appendix:

Aelōñ In Aibojooj Website Images

Creator:

Joy Enomoto

Contributors/ Website Manager

Matol Beasha, Alma Capelle, Darren Joji, Leit Kabua, Junior Kaisha, Fern Lehman, Francis Lenja Jr., Chris Sebastian (site manager), Kelly Luce Sebastian, Danielson P. Tawoj, TImmy Itaia, Boh Launit

Description

The website images are complementary to this paper. It is a collection of all of the submitted images created by the Majuro Photography Workshop as well as those that were not included in the initial exhibition. This website appendix includes the opening page and summary of the site and all of the portfolio images. Images appear in the order that they appear on the website. The contact information is also included.

Site Link:
https://aeloninaibojooj.weebly.com/
AELOIN IN AIBOJOOS

Happy Little Flowers in Paradise featuring Carline Pelmo, Jelita Peters, Jermi Seno, and
Wilmaya Riklon photo by Alma Capelle
View Portfolio
There are a few dominant visual narratives of the Marshall Islands, however precious few of those narratives are told by the Marshallese. Issues such as, climate change, the Compact of Free Association, and the nuclear legacy are discourses about the Marshall Islands fueled by the media. Images of loss and devastation that promote concepts of extinction rather than the deeper stories of an imaginative and problem solving people. But what happens when the cameras are given to those who actually the descendants of the land? How does the lens shift?

In July, 2018, a small group of Marshallese students and community members, came together to participate in a photography project engaging the question, “What is the visual story you want to tell about your home?” The result was a photo exhibition that was shared at the close of the National Climate Dialogue held at the International Conference Center in Majuro.

The participants named the exhibition, Aolōni in Albojooj - beautiful small things. The exhibition shares images of children, of laughter and favorite beaches, of soil erosion and solutions, of culture and community. In a just a few images, it provides a larger visual narrative of the beauty of place that is often not truly seen. It is for the people of this piece, who call this place home, sharing the beauty in the small things of everyday life. Their life.

The goal of this site is for the participants to add to their visual narrative at any time and to invite other Marshallese both local and abroad to contribute their own views of home.
Each of these photos were taken by our workshop participants. Each tells a different story about Majorca.
Alma Capelle: Flowers in Paradise Featuring: (left to right) Carnie Reimers, Jeffie Peter, Jorim Sam, and Wilmina Riklon
Get in Touch!

Are you interested in contributing to this site? Want to learn more?
Please contact our site manager:
Chris Sebastian [csebastian@cmi.edu]

* Indicates required field

Name *

First

Last

Email *

Comment *


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— “Raising the American flag in Rongerik,” March 1946

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— “Detonation Near Shore in Bikini,” March 1946


Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands. 1946. “Leaving for Rongerik” by Carl Mydans. University of Hawai‘i Mānoa Library, Pacific Collection


World War II Museum. 1943-1944. “Coast Guardsman giving a Marshallese woman a cigarette while holding a Marshallese boy.” Public Relations Division, U.S. Coast Guard.

— “7th Infantry Division soldier speaking with native woman in Kwajalein Atoll,” from the collection of Brigadier General LeRoy J. Stewart.
