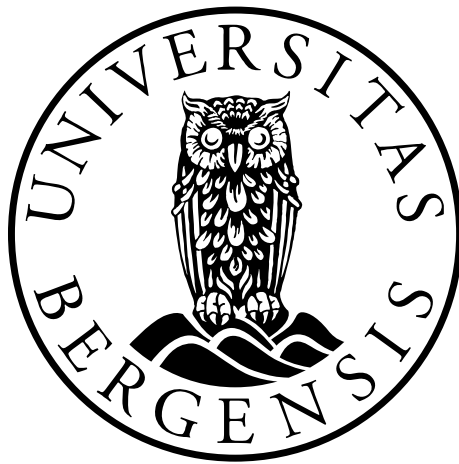


**“We are nothing without our Islands”:
Challenges and Crises in the Marshall Islands**



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Abstract

This thesis explores the themes of challenges and crises in the Marshall Islands. Through ethnographic data based on participant observation primarily in Majuro, the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), I study how significant changes are contextualized into Marshallese narratives. I also draw on extended ethnography from the Marshall Islands and the Pacific region. The history of the Marshall Islands is characterized by significant changes due to colonialization, militarization, and climate change. In Marshallese narratives, people tend to connect their existence in the present to past events that have affected increased change in Marshallese *manit* (culture). The past is not the only concern in Marshallese narratives because of the increased global climate change; Marshall islanders also consider the future in narratives about their existence. Based on this, the thesis explores the past, present, and future through a historical account, which includes several perspectives on historical processes in the islands, including the study of history as sequences of events and as social and cultural transitions. Based on my observations from Majuro, I explore the material landscape as an ongoing process of ruination based on the historical processes that I argue continue to unfold in the Marshall Islands. The thesis explores how the Marshallese are deeply connected through their relationship with the land which is also considered the most essential part of their existence. In the 1940s and the 1950s, the U.S. government used the Marshall Islands as a nuclear weapons testing site which caused severe consequences. People and land were contaminated by radiation from the tests, and islands were vaporized. The U.S. government forcefully relocated several communities off their islands, and people continue to live in permanent exile from their homes due to radiation contamination. In the cleanup of the nuclear era, atomic waste was collected and covered by a dome on one of the islands in the RMI. As we await the anticipated effects of climate change, the rising sea is threatening the concrete of the dome and the leaking of atomic waste into the sea. The RMI government have announced a national climate crisis because of the threats climate change poses to their islands, and based on continuous historical processes, I demonstrate how the Marshallese existence is significantly threatened by past challenges and crises. I argue that this backdrop is significant to the Marshallese fight for nuclear justice, and against climate change, and eventually for their entire existence. Through Marshallese narratives about challenges and crises in storytelling and activism, the Marshall Islanders intend to protect their existence in the world by fighting for nuclear justice and against climate change.

Acknowledgements

Writing this thesis has been an adventure combined with moments of excitement, challenges, struggles, and joy. It has exposed the people around me and me to my entire register of emotions, from several breakdowns to victories of realizations and breakthroughs. I could not have completed this thesis if it wasn't for the friendships, guidance, input, and discussions with my interlocutors, my supervisor, my fellow students, and my family and friends. I wish to thank you all for your contributions to this thesis.

I wish to start by thanking the department of social anthropology at the University of Bergen. The inspiring and supportive staff have inspired my engagement in social anthropology. Thank you to my supervisor, professor Edvard Hviding for inspiring conversations, support, exciting discussions, and guidance. A personal thank you to Miriam Ladstein for your contributions in the process of planning the fieldwork. Nora Haukali, thank you for the encouraging comments and advice before and during my fieldwork. I also thank my fellow students, especially Alice, Rebecka, Jon, Lisa, and Håkon. I believe our shared curiosity about the world will always keep us connected.

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Mahalo to Dr. Joseph Genz for your contribution and support. To the students and my friends in Hilo, *mahalo*, for making me feel like I have a home away from home on the Big Island. I also wish to address the University of the South Pacific in Suva for connecting me with The University of the South Pacific in the Marshall Islands. This introduction has been valuable for my whole research process and my stay in Majuro. To the entire staff and students at USP in Majuro: thank you for your warm welcome. I also wish to extend a *vinaka* to my Fijian aunties in Majuro. Finally, *kommol tata* to all the contributors and my friends in the Marshall Islands, thank you for showing me your island home. This thesis would not have been possible without any of you mentioned above, and I am forever grateful and humble for the friendships, conversations, and memories.

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Prologue

The Republic of the Marshall Island (RMI) was one of the first nations that formally defined the country as being in a national climate crisis¹. When I arrived in Majuro the capital of the RMI on February 4th, 2020, the first thing that welcomed me was the measures to prevent the spread of Coronavirus (Covid-19)². I had heard about coronavirus, sporadically in the news during my stay in Hawai'i. When arriving in Majuro, all passengers had to remain seated in the airplane before they were guided to get their temperatures checked and to fill out health forms. In addition, everyone who worked at the airport wore medical masks. Ever since this experience at the airport, Covid-19 would affect the local government's health discourse and the public discourses about change. Simultaneously, the global community prepared for local outbreaks and challenges.

The virus was still new and had not yet reached neither Norway, the USA, or the Marshall Islands upon my arrival. However, already on February 4th, 2020 (the date of my arrival), the Marshallese government began preparing for the possible spread of the virus. Information was issued concerning Covid-19 to spread awareness in the community. Everyone was advised to follow sanitation routines and stay at home when experiencing flu symptoms, and after some weeks, the construction of a completely new building began. It was going to function as the RMI quarantine ward. The local debate about the virus concerned the government's need to secure equipment and knowledge about the virus to protect the already vulnerable population, with a high percentage of underlying illnesses. Additionally, the two most populated islands in the RMI: Ebeye, and Majuro, were tackling an outbreak of dengue fever which had increased in several cases since July of 2019.

During my fieldwork, I would commute in a taxi up and down the one road of Majuro. The radio was always on. Through the radio, I would get updates and information about the global spread of Covid-19. When talking to people, they would express their concern about the virus to me. "I don't want to think about what will happen if the virus appears in the Marshalls," and «It must not hit our Islands; it will kill us all». However, even though people expressed a fear of the virus, they would still joke about it. An example I think back upon is from my visit to

¹ See Appendix A.

² See (WHO, "Coronavirus disease (Covid-19)").

one of the handicrafts stores where I would go every Saturday to learn the weaving of traditional handicrafts with pandanus and coconut leaves along with the most beautiful shells.

The women who taught me the traditional weaving did not speak English, so we had to communicate through sign language or the few words and phrases I knew in Marshallese. Every time I sat with them, they listened to the radio. The songs that were playing on the radio were mostly Christian music, country music, and American pop songs translated into Marshallese. One day the radio was playing a Marshallese song and throughout the song, I recognized a word: “coronavirus”. I looked at the women and repeated the song in a wondering tone; “coronavirus?”, pointing towards the radio. The ladies laughed and nodded. Later in the song, when the laughter had subsided, one of the ladies pointed to the radio and said, “dengue fever”, and they broke into laughter. Covid-19 was already a part of the Marshallese narrative. Later, it would also become an important part of my narrative, as I had to depart from Majuro only a little over a month after arriving.

Conducting fieldwork during the outbreak of a global crisis affected my data collection. When countries across the globe went into lockdown, the uncertainty of my stay increased regarding the local health capacity in Majuro and local advice for “tourists” to return home³. The uncertainty was tied to the health effects of the virus, closed borders, and how the virus would develop. During the last two weeks in the field, my focus concerned the various assessments on whether to stay in Majuro for the next 5 months (as initially planned) or to cancel the fieldwork and return home. I also shared a worry with the Marshallese over the uncertainty in the community regarding Covid-19. When the Norwegian government advised the universities to bring all students abroad home due to the uncertainty of the Covid-19 situation, I traveled across the world as every country went into lockdown, departing on the last flight from Majuro. When I landed in Norway the Norwegian government had initiated the strictest measures in national history during a time of peace, to reduce the spread of Covid-19.

Ever since March of 2020, I have been adapting my point of research far away from the physical field. I have stayed in touch with friends and interlocutors in addition to paying close attention to news and updates on the local and international Covid-19 spread. I have been lucky to get updates through social media about the local, Marshallese preparations for COP26, the United

³ I wouldn't consider myself a tourist, I was in the Marshall Islands to conduct fieldwork and to immerse myself in the everyday life. I was still a stranger in the Islands. The use of the category: tourist in this context was ambiguous.

Nations Climate Change Conference, and on local events such as Nuclear Victims Remembrance Day which is the national holiday (March 1st), commemorating the victims of the devastating U.S. atomic test bombings in the Marshall Islands during the 1940s and the 1950s. I have had to balance the depicting and the analyzing of my research data along with the new input from daily news and events since the end of the fieldwork. I have researched existing literature both anthropological and ethnographic studies, along with other literature which has strengthened the scope of my Covid-limited field data. This thesis contributes to the research of connections in crises and challenges in the Marshall Islands from a historical perspective up until the present day.

A Note on Inspiration from Marshallese Poetry and Storytelling

I am inspired by the Marshallese poet, artist, scholar, and climate activist Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner throughout the chapters that follow, and even the title of this thesis is a quote from her famous poem “Tell them” (Jetñil-Kijiner 2017:64-67). I have applied Kathy’s written words from the poetry collection *Iep Jaltok* (2017) in both titles and as part of chapters and discussions because her poetry tells stories and experiences from being Marshallese as well as conveying Marshallese stories throughout generations. Kathy’s poetry has also been influential in the Marshallese youth movement on nuclear justice and climate change, which I will get back to later in the following chapters. I acknowledge that by applying Kathy’s poetry, I superimpose a layer of analysis onto her poems that she might not have originally intended. Based on my knowledge of the Marshallese history and society, I have applied the poetry accordingly in the thesis to emphasize a point of view, explore a theme or a story, and set the scene by telling a story through a Marshallese narrative.

It is relevant to mention that Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner along with the late Minister and Ambassador Hon. Tony deBrum (1945-2017) has inspired much of my insights into Marshallese storytelling as a political tool in activism, climate change, and nuclear awareness. Tony deBrum played a central role in Marshallese advocacy against nuclear weapons in representing the Marshallese state and the civil society in the fight for independence and nuclear justice. He later played another central role in the fight against climate change, and for climate justice, especially during the Paris climate change negotiations in 2015. deBrum’s work is a representation of the broad activist scene in the Marshall Islands, as he is remembered as a national hero and an inspiration for the people (Friedman 2017).

Storytelling through poetry, art, music, and speeches, make the Marshall Islands a significant nation and island state in the fight for nuclear justice and the fight against climate change. The stories are a combination of ancient myths and legends as well as narratives based on personal experiences with challenges and crises, performed across generations and political hierarchy. Poets and activists like Jetñil-Kijiner and government officials and diplomats like deBrum apply extensive use of such storytelling techniques in various contexts, to demonstrate a unique

Marshallese narrative, but also to play a prominent part in the successful arena of Pacific climate diplomacy (Borrevik 2019).

Chapter 1

Introduction

“Show them where it is on a map”

This thesis is an ethnographic and historical study of challenges and crises in the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) in the North-central Pacific Ocean. The ethnography is based on fieldwork over 2.5 months: one month in Hilo, Hawai'i, and six weeks in Majuro, the capital of the RMI. Through this fieldwork, I have developed an ethnographic account presented through narratives that can give specific insights into the elaboration of historical processes, landscape, and social movements in a time of escalating crises.

In 2018 when I was an exchange student at the University of Hawai'i at Hilo (UHH), for one semester, my interest in the Pacific Islands and the Pacific Ocean was sparked. UHH offers several anthropology classes, primarily associated with American cultural anthropology along with several Pacific-oriented courses. My research interests soon grew into the themes of climate change and activism, and at this junction: The Marshall Islands. This inspired me to explore my studies of the Marshall Islands further when I returned to Bergen. The University of Bergen has an extended Pacific “community” in the Bergen Pacific Studies Research Group which enabled further specialization in the topic.

I finished my bachelor's degree at the University of Bergen in 2019. My thesis was titled “Conceptualizing Climate Change in the Marshall Islands,” and I am thankful to have had the opportunity to develop my interest in the Marshall Islands further in the 2- year master's degree program at the University of Bergen. I have had the advantage of being a USP student under the closely affiliated relationship between the University of Bergen and the University of the South Pacific (USP), which helped me get settled into the field once I arrived in Majuro. The staff at the RMI USP campus assisted me in obtaining all the necessary papers, such as a research permit and even my visa, before I arrived.

Because of the Covid-19 breakout, I had to end my fieldwork much sooner than expected, which led to several methodological challenges which I will discuss later in this chapter. However, looking back at it, since my thesis explores change and challenges: the abrupt changes in my fieldwork has become an integral part of my research and perception of challenge and crises.

My initial progress plan included 5 months of fieldwork on the island (and RMI capital city) of Majuro, from February to July 2020, but due to the Covid outbreak, I had to return to Norway in March and continue my research there. Before departing for Majuro, I spent a month at UHH in Hilo on the Big Island of Hawai'i to meet with Marshallese students, former professors, and old friends.

I spent January of 2020 in Hilo planning and preparing for my fieldwork. I found accommodation in Majuro, finished my visa application, and applied for a research permit. While waiting for my visa to be approved by the RMI, I spent time at the UH Hilo campus and volunteered at the conference of the Association for Social Anthropology in Oceania (ASAO⁴) hosted in Hilo that January. At the UHH campus, I was introduced by one of my former professors Dr. Joseph Genz to meet with Marshallese students. The students are part of a larger Marshallese community in Hilo and on the Big Island. "Hilo is a home away from home," one of the students explained to me. Many Marshallese have migrated there, including Marshallese churches and families⁵. My month in Hilo was therefore an essential part of the preparations for my upcoming stay in Majuro and was in fact where my fieldwork began. After arriving in Majuro on February 4th, I spent six weeks on the island conducting fieldwork where I focused on climate change, youth activism, and local awareness of climate change issues.

I will start by giving a brief introduction to Majuro. Later in this chapter, I will go through the preparations I did prior to my fieldwork and discuss how I progressed in the field and how the Covid-19 pandemic, resulted in unexpected consequences to the accomplishment of the fieldwork and the development of this thesis. After organizing my fieldnotes and reading the additional literature referred to in this thesis, the focus of my research has changed slightly within the 2 years since the fieldwork was conducted (and interrupted). It is impossible not to mention the effects and threats of Covid-19, as it has affected the whole world in one way or another. The islanders whom I met in Majuro, started to befriend, and learn from, are people living in a place with many threats, especially regarding global crises. Such global crises I will elaborate through this thesis, are present in the local spaces of the Marshall Islands. To conduct research at a time of an escalating crisis has been a significant moment to gain unique insights into how people live with challenges and extended crises within specific contexts. Although

⁴ The annual conference for social anthropologists working in the Pacific region. The conference offered several interesting discussions on various topics and new research contributions in the region.

⁵ There are several Marshallese diasporas groups on the Big Island of Hawai'i. See Carucci (2019) for more about the Marshallese diaspora on the Big Island.

this thesis is focused primarily on the fieldwork I conducted in Majuro in February-March 2020, I also draw on other empirical work and historical records from the Marshall Islands generally. Following local conventions, in this thesis, I will be referring to the Marshall Islands also as “the Marshalls” or “the islands”, and “the RMI”.

Research questions:

The overarching theme of this thesis is that of challenges and crises. The Marshallese people have experienced several significant changes due to nuclear weapon testing and later to the rising consequences of climate change. This dual threat is divided into a *past* crisis and a *coming* crisis, and eventually, the consequence is an ongoing, existential threat to the Marshall Islands and for the Marshall islanders. Both crises threaten the human existence. Due to the past crisis of nuclear weapon testing in the Marshall Islands, several challenges have followed such as climate change and Covid-19:

- **What are some of the deeper connections between the legacy of nuclear times and following crises and challenges in the Marshall Islands?**

I wish to explore how the Marshallese have changed the discourse of vulnerability into a discourse of resiliency. Facing the coming crisis of climate change, the Marshallese are promoting action to prevent future disasters, not only in their islands but on a larger scale, due to the global threat of climate change. Marshallese politicians, activists, elders, and youth apply the Marshallese art of storytelling into various arts such as music, dance, poetry, or even in speeches when speaking about change, on both a local and a global level.

- **How have experiences of crises not only affected people’s vulnerability but also their instinct to fight and survive, to adapt, or to try and change the course of direction of such challenges and crises?**

The awareness of what change can mean based on past experiences, and the fears and worries of what it can come to mean in the future define the uneven line Marshallese activists have to balance when promoting nuclear justice along with the fight against climate change. Firstly, the stories they are telling are not only stories but there are also actual apparent changes developing in the nature and climate along their shores and islands, as well as in their society and local communities.

- **Therefore, I believe it is also necessary to ask if there is a difference between words and action in the local and international discussion on climate change through discourses?**
- **How are the local communities committed to approach change and crises in their islands, on a local level?**

As I will discuss later, there is also a generational gap in the Islands between Marshallese elders and youth when it comes to the experience of change and crises in the Marshall Islands. There is a growing younger population that will be the witnesses of climate change, and the older generations are the witnesses of the nuclear weapons tests in the 1940 and the 1950s. In what ways are stories lost, protected, and continued when generations are drawn further apart due to the experiences of different challenges and crises? How are the past and the future viewed through a generational division of narratives based on lived experiences?

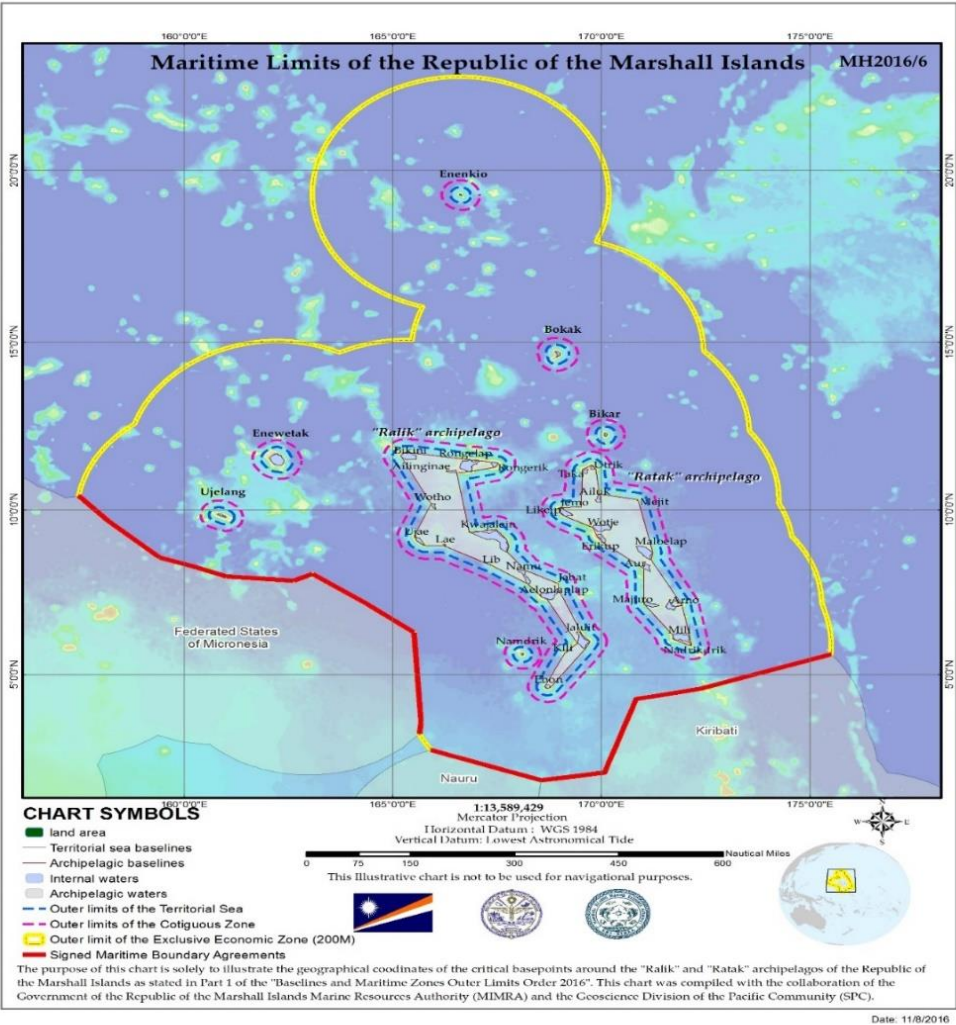
- **In other words, how are challenges and crises experienced in the Marshall Islands?**
- **And how are challenges and crises connected and bring meaning through contextualized experiences in people’s collective memories of the past, and in their envisions for the future?**

Arriving in Majuro

After 5 hours in the air with a view of only blue water below, a sight of land came into view. A circular formation with a line of land surrounded by ocean on both sides and only one road in which I could spot miniature cars driving inline, tiny houses with smaller green patches in between, and palm trees stretching high into the sky. I was looking at the Majuro Atoll. When the plane landed, I looked out the window and saw waves crashing onto the road. A big blue ocean also came into view on the opposite side of the aisle. *Iokwe*⁶, “Welcome to the Marshall Islands”, I read on a sign at the airport. Majuro is the capital of the Marshall Islands, located in the Ralik chain and home to almost half of the Marshallese population of 59,194 people in 2020 (The World Bank 2020).

⁶ Here, *Iokwe* refers to “Welcome” in Marshallese. *Iokwe* has several meanings such as “Hello” and “Love” in Marshallese.

The Marshall Islands consist two atoll chains: *Ralik* and *Ratak* and of several islands including the large, vast ocean that connects them (Tobin 2002:1). People live throughout the outer atolls⁷, but the central two atolls of Kwajalein and Majuro are where most people live (Hezel 2001:140-141). The United States occupies parts of the Kwajalein Atoll for a large military base (Dvorak 2018:7-9). And since Majuro is the capital of the Marshall Islands, over half of the population lives there, it is an urban city center for business, education, and politics in the RMI. The RMI has a total landmass of about 181 square kilometers compared to the almost two million square kilometers of an exclusive economic zone (EEZ) (Pacific UNDPa, Pacific UNDPb). EEZ is an area of maritime sovereignty based on the Law of the Sea and extending 200 nautical miles from land, with some modifications for states that consists of an archipelago or several.



Figur 1 Map over the RMI total exclusive economic zone (EEZ) (<https://rmi-data.sprep.org/>)

⁷ From my understanding, “the outer atolls” is applied whenever talking about all atolls, except from the urban atolls of Kwajalein and Majuro.

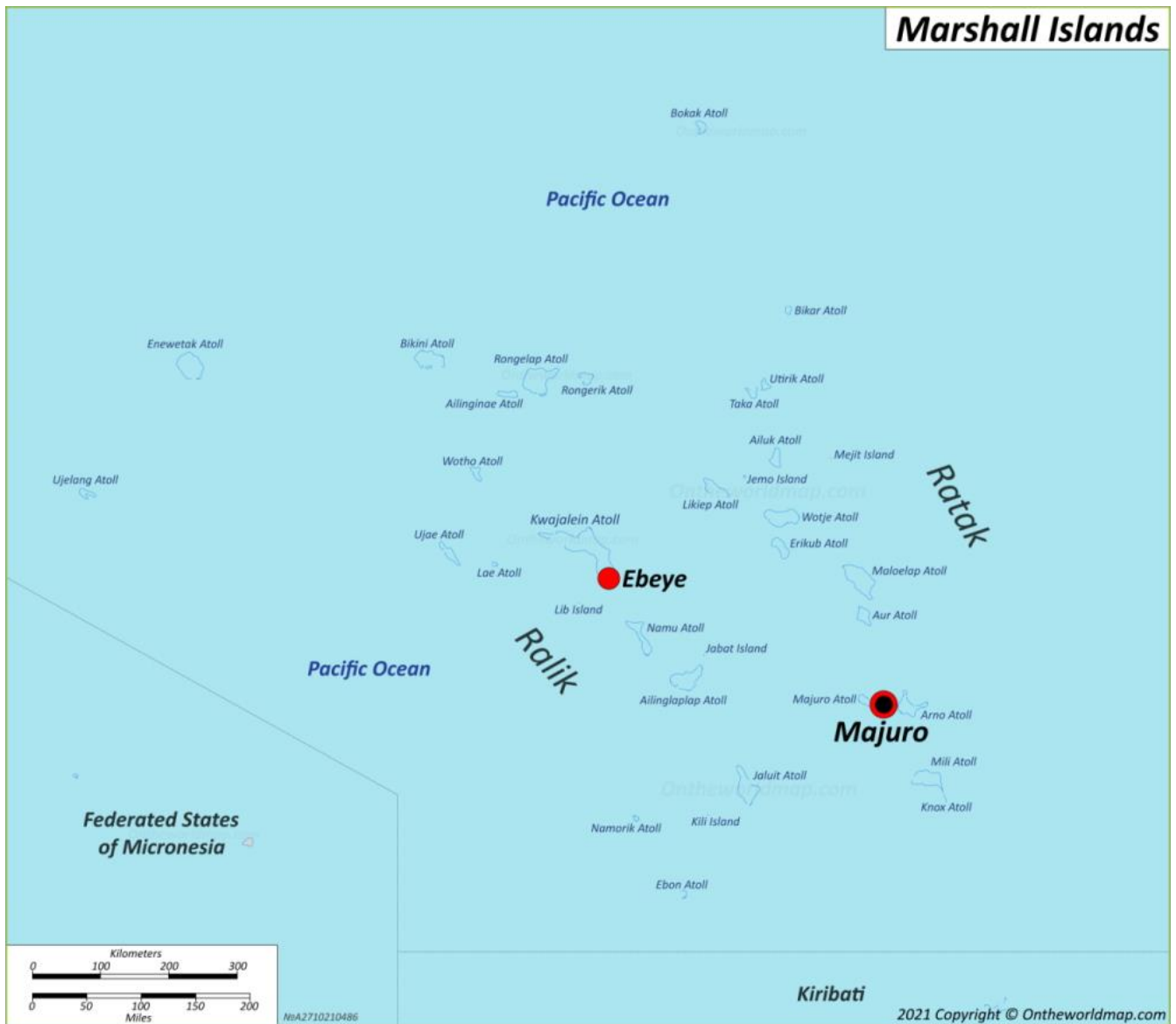


Figure 2 Map capturing the Republic of Marshall Island (www.ontheworldmap.com).



Figure 3 Map capturing the RMI and in the right corner a highlighted map of Majuro atoll. The main island of Majuro is the long-stretched Island with Laura and Rita as the two endpoints (www.ontheworldmap.com).

One of the first things I did after arriving was to navigate myself on the island, and I began observing life along the road. I used this simple method to observe and explore things that I could later use in conversations with people I met. I would also come to learn that an outsider cannot spot all the effects of global climate change in a specific place, but that it is in fact through living within the environment over time, that the Marshallese recognize and experience climate change and its consequences.

On both sides of the long-stretched island, there is water. On one side is the ocean, and on the other side is a lagoon. The lagoon is typical for low-lying atolls in the Pacific, just like the island's sectioning into the ocean side and lagoon side. On one side is the wide sea, referred to as the ocean side (*Lik*), and on the other side: is the lagoon side (*Laar*). This division functions as pointers to navigate positions along the atoll island. The conditions of *lik* and *laar*, has also traditionally offered the settlements of households within matrilineal lineages, stretching from lagoon side to oceanside. In addition, such a division of households includes various access to resources depending on the environment in the various locations on the island⁸ (Hezel 2001:10, Hviding 2003:251,258-260). I quickly observed the difference between the lagoon and the ocean in Majuro. On the oceanside waves often build up and crash across the reef and onto the shore, whilst more damaging saltwater erosion is evident on the lagoon side.

Majuro Atoll consists of several narrow, elongated islands, separated by channels through or over the reef. The main island of Majuro consists of two islands, connected by a bridge, which is also the highest point of elevation on the island, with no more than three meters above sea level. In some areas along the atoll, the width is particularly broad or narrow, especially along with the airport. Where the airport in Majuro is situated today, there used to be an opening between the lagoon and ocean, which was filled to construct the airport strip. Due to the landfill where the sea used to flow into the lagoon, this area on the island often gets more affected by king tides, as the ocean tried to push through and often washes the road full of water. Along the island, the Lagoon Road stretches from one of the island end to the other.

⁸ I bring this up in the following discussion in chapter three, about how settlements traditionally sectioned the atolls of the Marshall Islands based on resources, power, kinship, social structures, and the environment. Also see Dvorak (2018:58-60), Genz (2018:50) and Hviding (2003:258-260).

The first thing that came into mind once I arrived in Majuro was: this is a special place. Only three meters above the ocean makes it impossible not to respect the grand blue beauty that surrounds the land. During my walks along the Majuro Island, I usually stayed on the lagoon side, as it was easier to access through the University beach or the town park. As I walked along the lagoon and the seawall construction⁹, I began noticing places where the cement wall appeared to have cracks and water was running through beneath, other times I would spot remains of old sea walls under recently constructed walls. In some areas, seawater appeared underneath the foundation of the seawalls, washing up waste from the lagoon onto the land.



Figure 4 A picture of a rock sea wall along the Majuro lagoon. Photo by author.

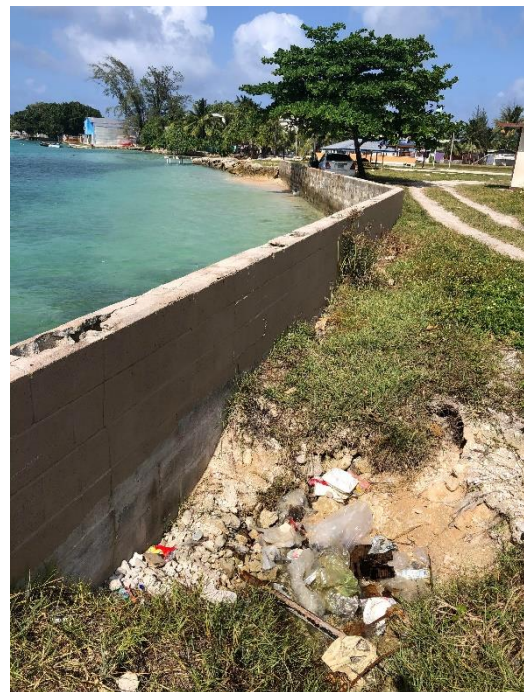


Figure 5 A picture of a damaged seawall along the Majuro lagoon, where water has pushed through under the wall and brought along trash in the process of this. Photo by author.

Another thing I soon became very aware of waste. During my walks, I would observe trash everywhere along the road, along the shore, and everything from noodle packaging, potato chips bags, beer cans, and takeaway boxes. Sometimes the logo on the waste of old plastic packaging had faded from long immersion in saltwater. Other times, I could spot American beer cans such as Bud Light and Budweiser, Asian noodle packaging, Coca-Cola bottles, and car tires. In the lagoon I observed old boats, constantly in the same position, they appeared to be abandoned shipwrecks. There were big green and grey plastic containers stacked in front of houses and

⁹ Seawalls are constructed on most stretches along the lagoon in Majuro, and in some housing areas close to the ocean. They are built to stop or slow down saltwater erosion and flooding along the shores.

sanitary and health posters along the roadside. I would soon learn that all the things mentioned above tell a story about climate change and other challenges and crises in the Marshall Islands.

Methodological approach

This section will outline the different methodological approaches I applied while conducting my fieldwork. I will apply a range of perspectives from anthropological theory and methodology to compare and problematize my own experiences from being in the field. As mentioned, due to the Covid-19 outbreak, my time in the field only lasted for 6 weeks, instead of the planned duration of 5 months. Time is essential in such fieldwork. Therefore, when I discuss the data collection from my fieldwork, its disruption has affected the development of this thesis. Finally, I will discuss how I have applied my empirical data and explored the already established, published research in addition to news and updates from the Islands and the broader Pacific community when returning from the field.

I will start by defining what anthropological methodology is and what it aims to do. It is a qualitative way to collect data that stands out from other scientific disciplines. Later I will introduce my fieldwork and challenges, especially in the light of the global pandemic. I just started my fieldwork before it came to an end. It ended abruptly when the world went into a vacuum of not knowing what would happen in the future. The pandemic has brought different challenges to all parts of the world. This can be a challenging time for anthropologists to conduct fieldwork, as we cannot be present in the field.

When planning for my fieldwork, I developed a plan of progress where I reflected on different topics and situations that would help prepare me for different scenarios. I presented a methodological approach, including participant observation, hoping to emerge myself into everyday life in Majuro. Traditionally, anthropological fieldwork runs over several months, or even years. The long duration gives anthropologists a key to a holistic understanding of the context under study. Over long-term presence in people's lives, anthropologists can build relationships based on engagement and closeness. At the same time, it also gives the advantage to reveal social relations and grasping a holistic understanding (Shah 2017:50-51). While conducting fieldwork, applying the methodological approach of participant observation, building relationships and trust with interlocutors, is of great importance, but this takes time. Bernard (2017) argues that throughout fieldwork the researcher not only adapts to the surroundings and people she meets but also learns about what is going on in a certain

context. A part of this is to understand the practical knowledge of one's interlocutors by engaging in everyday activities to participate and gain an understanding of the way of life in the field (Zhale 2012:53).

Foundational to participant observation is the recognition that knowledge itself is practical and that theoretical or abstract knowledge- that which is communicated in language- is a very particular kind of knowledge that must be situated in relation to practice (Shah 2017:52).

During long-term fieldwork and by applying participant observation, anthropologists can understand this knowledge concerning specific contexts. I had developed a progress plan to prepare for the fieldwork before departing. Even though conducting fieldwork, is something one can never be fully prepared to do because you don't know what kind of people or situations you will run into until you are physically present in the field. Even though my fieldwork ended earlier than planned. I still believe that I made essential and valuable observations while attempting to make an entry into the field (Bernard 2017:284).

Schwender (1997) writes of the " Surprise of ethnography ", which outlines a discussion of a field methodology to implement all senses and to take in every surprise of first encounters when entering a new field. By opening all senses, one can discover a lot more instead of being stained by some determined viewpoint or any precedents. I believe that my short fieldwork is a clear example of just this. Seen in retrospect I discovered more things from being in the Majuro context than I could get from reading any book or article. I let myself get surprised by my surroundings and interactions. In my "beginner" stage of the fieldwork, by applying participant observation, I slowly discovered elements of the context I was starting to emerge (Schwender 1997:154-155).

When looking back at the plan of progress that I had developed before traveling to Majuro, I had different ideas of how to emerge myself in the everyday life of Majuro, especially including the stay in Majuro over an extended time. According to my new surroundings and establishment of relationships, I argue that I would have been able to emphasize more on the participation part of participant observation than what I had the opportunity to do during my short stay. Still, in retrospect, I can spot times when I was surprised, and how I soon adapted to life in Majuro at an already early stage of the fieldwork. My method aimed to observe my surroundings by walking and commuting in taxis along the one paved road of the island, it allowed me to create descriptions of the landscape relevant to the historical processes of place and context in Majuro.

I started doing this as soon as I experienced that social life surrounds that one paved road. I started asking myself: How can I say something about what is going on when I have not yet emerged into everyday life? In the empirical example that follows, I describe how I went out to “take the pulse of Majuro,” along “the one road”.

“Only one road”: The pulse of Majuro

We are shards of broken beer bottles

Burrowed beneath fine with sand

We are children flinging

like rubber bands

across a road chugging with cars

Tell them

We only have one road

(Jetnil-Kijiner 2017:66)

I began exploring Majuro by roaming around town. Majuro indeed has only one paved road which connects all the townships along the island, with an ocean view on one side of the road and a view of the lagoon on the other. The main mode of transportation in Majuro is by car. People either obtain private cars or catch a taxi to commute to different places along the island. Since there is only one road, to communicate in a taxi, you must wait on the relevant side of the road, and as a taxi is approaching you must signalize that you are going the same way. If the taxi has any vacant spaces, it stops at the side of the road and picks you up. Majuro taxis stop to pick up and drop off people all along the road and if there is room in the taxi you share it with other people that are heading in the same direction as you, carpooling. One thing I soon noticed was that it was very quiet in the taxis during the rides. People, for the most part, got in, pointed to where they wanted to get dropped off, paid a dollar or two (depending on where they were going) by handing it to the driver in cash, and closed the door without saying much more

than *kommol*¹⁰. If there was any communication at all, it was all in Marshallese, which of course created difficulties for me as a fieldwork beginner. However, by riding taxis up and down the road, I noticed how the road seems to be the “pulse” of the island. By observing through the taxi windows, I could spot schoolkids running to a little consignment store in their uniforms, I could see construction workers taking naps along the roadside in the middle of the day, mothers with their kids buying snacks while at the laundromat, taxis, and drivers playing checkers under a roof in the park. I saw cars driving back and forth throughout the day. Some Americans made about the Majuro traffic compared to the Los Angeles traffic, since it is always busy, after all, there is only one road.

In the afternoon, life along the road transformed, people would sit outside stores playing the ukulele or braiding each other’s hair, some kids were still dressed in their school uniforms, while others had changed and were running around and playing, crossing the road without giving drivers any notice. Dogs crossed the road, barking at people. It gets chillier in the afternoons, and around sunset, every basketball and volleyball court along the roadside is filled with kids and adults playing. It seemed calmer, and more relaxed in the afternoon, people came outside more than during the day, and there was more happening in the afternoon. After all, people seemed to prefer the more chilled afternoons, rather than the hot and humid middays.

I went for afternoon walks as well, especially downtown where a friend had given me a tour and walked with me, so I knew where it was safe to walk to avoid mean dogs. I would walk up and down this path several times and observe the life along the road. People observed me too and stared at me whenever I walked past. When you are along the road, you become very visible to everyone around you. Some people would tell me that they had witnessed me walking along the road the next day and expressed how crazy I was for walking around in the middle of the day, when the sun is at its highest point, burning hot. I would walk a couple of blocks up and down the road and I would feel like I was the only one walking. I could meet someone in one store, and then a couple of minutes to see them drive down one block to the next store. I remember thinking: “there must be more cars than people in Majuro”, people drive or commute in taxis, everywhere even though it is a short distance. Besides the road, I also embedded some of the everyday life routines of people in Majuro. I went to the grocery store and had to wait in line to get a case of chicken or try to figure out which of the available, imported vegetables looked the freshest.

¹⁰ *Kommol* is the Marshallese translation of the English word “Thanks”. *Kommol tata* means “Thank you”.

Participation in the field and shared experiences of chaos

In Majuro, I sought out social scenes where I could participate in conversations and events on the topic of climate change. I attended climate workshops, and meetings, and generally “talked story¹¹” to develop relationships and to “enter” the field of climate change in Majuro. I was lucky to establish connections with several college students through the introduction of my Hilo friends, USP, and a climate change club. In addition, I stayed with a team of American documentary makers for the first two weeks in Majuro. They introduced me to several local artists through their filmmaking project which focused on Marshallese storytelling through poetry and music. Making connections in Majuro was challenging at times, but after a while, people quickly began recognizing me in the public space such as along the road or at the grocery stores. In the next section, I discuss two empirical examples of how I participated in the public space of both everyday life in Majuro and the chaos of the rumors about Covid-19.

In Majuro, most payments are preferred in cash, and most places don’t keep a bank terminal. I quickly adapted to always carrying cash with me, but having access to cash required several trips to the ATM. There are three ATMs in Majuro, and they are all located downtown. Going to the bank is something everyone does, and I soon noticed how people planned their visits to go to the ATMs to withdraw cash. One day I waited in line outside one of the ATMs, and the person in front of me came back with zero cash and shook his head, the ATM was empty. I made my way down to one of the other ATMs and was surprised that there was no line, only when I came to realize that this machine was also empty. I walked down to the third and final ATM, and a lady approached me and expressed that “the Island is out of cash”. We were sharing the same frustrations over not being able to withdraw cash. I went back to the first ATM again which is located outside the main grocery store, and I saw that there was still a line and assumed it was working again. Finally, after withdrawing cash, I went to get groceries and met some friends and told them of my journey to all three ATMs. Suddenly the lady from earlier came walking by and she overheard my story and said that she had tried the second ATM again and that it worked now, so it was typical that the one outside the grocery also was working when she got here. We had been on the same journey, just going in opposite directions, sharing the

¹¹ To “Talk Story”, is a Marshallese-English term with parallels to most of the other Pacific Islands. The term covers conversations, discussions, or the sharing of experiences and knowledge orally.

same frustrations but also the same relief that we were able to get cash so that we could shop for groceries.

The example above shows how I used walking and taking public transportation to get an understanding of my surroundings while being present in the circumstances that I came to share with the people of Majuro. By heading the same way and being on the ground in the city of Majuro, “walking affords an experience of embodiment to the extent that it is grounded in an inherently sociable engagement between self and environment” (Lee & Ingold 2006:68). Even though I did not get to develop my fieldwork as far as having a chance to go along with people to their work or into their homes and participate to this extent in their everyday routines, I was still sharing the same surroundings while being present in public spaces such as the grocery stores, ATMs, and moving up and down the island. To be a part of the life along the road either by foot or in a taxi and by sharing the same paths with the people in Majuro, I got a sense of what was going on in Majuro (Lee & Ingold 2006:67-68).

The Covid-19 outbreak put me in the same situation of chaos as the Marshallese and offered me to take part in a shared experience of the Covid-19 situation in Majuro. My fieldwork has been characterized by Covid-19 to a great extent, but I will not only focus on the negative effects regarding the cancelation of the fieldwork. I argue that the event of the chaos which occurred when the news about Covid-19 came, led to a shared experience in Majuro. There was a desperate frustration over whether the virus had reached the Islands or not, and what was going to happen if it were to reach the Islands? From March 12th, 2020, the University of Bergen implemented a call for its overseas students to plan their travel back to Norway, if necessary, with the assistance of the university. The time leading up to my hurried departure was dense and interesting, and I give an account below.

I left Majuro on March 16th unknowingly that the RMI would in fact be one of the last nations in the world to detect a case of Covid-19. On March 8th, 2020, the RMI border was closed for incoming flights, which even left Marshallese abroad closed off from their homeland for months (Berta et al. 2020:54). I was present in the event of chaos, I experienced the worry, the desperate need for information and I experienced the rumors about alleged cases of Covid-19. Rumors spread about people who were hospitalized from contracting the virus, and about the hospital’s low capacity only obtaining 3 oxygen tanks. There were rumors about container ships in the lagoon where people in quarantine jumped off and swam onshore, additional rumors came

through the coconut-wireless¹² that was running hot and contributed to increased common worry over the situation. People were sincerely worried, I was worried. How were we going to deal with the virus? Taxis are packed with several people, we live closely together, would the heat and humid weather increase the spreading? All these questions created a chaotic situation. People, like myself, who planned to leave Majuro had no idea that when the last plane took off, the Marshall Islands remained closed for months.

Rumors, fear, and uncertainty about Covid-19 spread across the entire island and Majuro turned into a state of crisis that afforded me with an impression of what a Marshallese state of crisis looks like. Inspired by Jackson's approach to events, in "The Course of an Event" (2005) where he argues that events characterize our experiences in the way we speak and remember moments after they occur. He argues that it is in the moments of calm between turbulent events "that we take stock of our situation, come to terms with what has occurred, and begin anew. Accordingly, these are also the moments when we foreshadow- in the ways we speak, think, and act" (Jackson 2005:1). I took part in the chaotic situation in Majuro, and I got to observe how people were constantly worried about the situation, stating that "we will all die if we get the virus", and adding that "there are so many Marshallese who have underlying illnesses and they won't be able to survive if they get the virus". Another approach was people's reaction to my departure, stating that "the islands are the safest place to be right now". I argue this event is valuable to my participation and observations in the field. In the fear of Covid-19, people were already "taking stock of the situation" (Jackson 2005:1), in efforts to make sense of their, and our common participation in the global Covid-19 pandemic based on the context of Majuro. People were also in the process of "coming to terms with and foreshadowing" (Jackson 2005:1) when discussing the possible outcomes of Covid-19 to Marshallese based on historical accounts from nuclear and colonial times in the islands. The event has, therefore, been valuable to my further study of crises and challenges in the Marshall Islands due to my presence and participation in the moment of an escalating crisis and challenges in Majuro.

Throughout this I was a participant in the chaos of the event along with everyone else in Majuro, I also got the opportunity to observe how people reacted during this event. I suddenly discovered how the Marshallese would be constantly worried over the situation, stating that "We will all die if we get the virus", and that "There are so many Marshallese who has

¹² An expression describing the spreading of information mostly based on rumors, which travels fast from one person to another in the islands. This information and rumors are based on hearsay and retelling.

underlying illnesses and they won't be able to survive if they get the virus.” Another interesting approach was people's reaction to my departure stating that “The Islands are the safest place to be right now”.

Parameters of interrupted fieldwork: in retrospect

I have noted how my weeks in January 2020 at the University of Hawai'i at Hilo were integral to my fieldwork. I spent 3 weeks in Hilo, Hawai'i, and met with Marshallese students. I learned some basic Marshallese words and phrases, and “talked story”. Nevertheless, my time in Hilo also gave me the advantage to organize meetings with specific people when I arrived in Majuro. Though I had a list of people I wanted to meet with once I got to Majuro, my fieldwork, unfortunately, ended before I got to expand my network further or got to investigate new and arising questions, which I developed during my stay. During the six weeks, in Majuro, my curiosity grew, and my vision expanded as a result, I developed new questions and leads that I didn't have the opportunity to follow up on due to the abruptness of the fieldwork. I found it challenging setting up a time to meet with people as well, and to truly make an “entrance” into socializing and entering the “field”. I believe part of the reason for this is that Majuro is in fact a city. People work and go to school; they live with their families, and it was frustrating seeing people being busy and how I was not being able to take part in what they were “actually” doing. I spent a lot of time wondering where the students went off to after school hours or what they did on the weekends. Another dimension of this was that if I was in a public space such as a restaurant or a taxi, people did not seem comfortable speaking English to me.

The youth would often converse in Marshallese whenever I was around. I felt like an outsider. Being in Majuro and not speaking the language with a wish to research a specific topic, it was challenging to establish the necessary social connections and trust when having limited time. I often wondered if I would ever get to understand what was going on in Majuro and not just be an “outsider”. Of course, I must look to the anthropological methodology of participant observation, and to what Bernard noted about time: “The amount of time you spend in the field can make a big difference in what you learn” (Bernard 2017:279). If I had managed to have more time in the field, people would perhaps have gotten more used to me hanging around, I would also have had opportunities to learn more of the language which could have led me to more insight.

Despite this, my affiliation with USP gave me an advantage when I was talking with people, they would take me more seriously and even introduce me to relevant people or organizations. though sometimes I experience being taken too seriously. I would get asked if my research had started and if I had conducted interviews, which was frustrating because that was not a part of my approach. Another example was how people I talked to first assumed that I was a teacher coming from the United States to volunteer. I was assigned different roles because I did not fit into the local context. In developing my research from outside of the field, I have become even more of an outsider, as I have not been able to be present in the field. Even though I experienced challenges while conducting fieldwork, challenges are part of any fieldwork. The fact that I got 6 weeks in the field gave me valuable insights for my further research, it has also let me share some unique experiences with the islanders in Majuro, such as the views, the sounds, and the constant presence of the ocean. These are field experiences that no article or book can provide, and they are valuable for getting “a sense of Majuro”.

Ethical considerations regarding the fieldwork

I want to add a note about the ethical considerations regarding my fieldwork and the development of this thesis. As I was aware before traveling to Majuro, I had to account for ethical considerations of the people whom I would socialize with in the field. This is also part of the pre-fieldwork course in my department’s master’s program. I have therefore, anonymized all my interlocutors, and when I refer to them I do so by calling them student, youth, or Marshallese as a more general term. Everyone has been anonymized except from public figures who have played a central role in RMI’s history of challenges and crises.

One thing I noticed and have been giving a lot of thought to in my further work as well is the Marshallese history and the Marshallese people’s feelings towards research and researchers. Regarding history, the Marshallese people’s lives, homes, and stories have been much researched, most especially concerning the research that does not benefit them. The 67 atomic bombs that were detonated in the Marshalls during 1946-1958 generated profound transformations of Marshallese reality. The United States used the Marshall Islands as a testing site for nuclear weapons, mostly without informing the islanders and quite often ignoring local needs for information and early warning (Barker 2004:20-23). Another aspect of misinformation comes to light when looking into how the effects of radiation were treated in the aftermath of nuclear tests. The people of the Marshall Islands were examined by American

medical doctors to find out how humans react to radiation, not intending to treat the effects¹³. The tests have impacted the Marshallese in several ways; physically, mentally, culturally, economically, and socially as noted by Rudiak-Gould (2013:19-21). The local need for Marshallese to be informed about research interests is, therefore, something I have been aware of when conducting fieldwork in a Marshallese context, both in the diaspora in Hilo and Majuro because research can be a sensitive topic to the Marshallese due to their historical experiences of research.

Another important thing to note about anthropological research in the Marshall Islands is the role of anthropologists in the Islands. Following what Holly Barker (2004:24-27) noted about anthropologists' presence in the Marshall Islands throughout history, during the time of the nuclear weapons testing several anthropologists worked for the United States government to conduct research concerning the Marshallese social life. American anthropologists worked to collect data about the Marshallese which would later be applied when pursuing the local population to give consent to the nuclear weapons testing and to relocate from their home islands. Some of this research is valuable and relevant because it provides an insight into the Marshallese historical context. On the other hand, the basis for this research was misused on an unethical basis to provide military benefits to the United States. Because of this, there has later been a shift in anthropology to focus on the importance of research interests, between institutions and interlocutors, in addition to collaborative research in applied anthropology, which has contributed to new insights into the field of the Pacific. In other words, it is important to recognize the role of anthropology today, for whom we are conducting research and in ways, our research can affect and include the people we are studying (Barker 2004-27-28, Genz 2018:8-9,114-115).

I witnessed some of the efforts made by the local community in Majuro to fight for both nuclear and climate justice. It is important to take notes of the hypersensitive issues the Marshallese have had to deal with and the consequences of certain events that might affect them for several generations to come such as the nuclear testing and climate change. Through embedded memories and firsthand experiences, Marshallese are working to rewrite history. While preparing for my fieldwork I made a note about what Steiner (2015:150) writes of the importance of agency within the Pacific communities dealing with climate change. Through

¹³ This project was titled "Project 4.1" by the U.S. government and I elaborate on this in chapter two. See Barker (2004:41-44), and Yamada (2004).

performative events such as poetry, music, and dance, islanders have communicated new meanings to their lived experiences of culture and climate change. It is necessary to acknowledge all the efforts made by Pacific Islanders, as the climate crisis could raise questions that would need to be answered on different levels of the global society through international, national, local, and individual levels (Steiner 2015:148). I hope my thesis can contribute to the Marshallese fight for climate and nuclear justice while also being respectful. I believe that I have an ethical and moral responsibility when learning about the different aspects of the Marshallese fight for these causes. I will never fully understand the lived experiences that the Marshallese have embodied throughout generations in encountering challenges and crises.

Returning from the field

In March of 2020, just 6 weeks after my arrival to Majuro I had to return from the field. I spent the time after my return to Norway organizing the data, I had been able to collect and draw lines to other ethnographic work from the Marshall Islands and the Pacific region. By having a sense of the Majuro scene, I have built on anthropological studies by scholars who have worked in the Marshall Islands and the Micronesian along with the broader Pacific region, while adding new and relevant documentation such as news articles. I apply empirical examples of scholars along with my empirical data. In addition, it has been both necessary and important to look at the Marshallese narratives in music, speeches, and poetry to capture the local responses and stories of the Marshallese's experience with change. I have also stayed in contact with some of my interlocutors and have been frequently updated on local news and events through social media. This has been helpful to uphold the ethical considerations I made above as well, as I can include my interlocutors even though we are miles and miles apart. To summarize, my main argument is that having experience from being physically in the field in Majuro no matter the duration, has benefitted my thesis and I have been able to capture a sense of the state of Majuro. It has also been beneficial when researching ethnography from the Islands. Even though I have not been present in the field since March of 2020, I have an idea about Majuro and have seen what it is like to a certain extent, I have made contacts and had more resources available than if I didn't have any field experience. In one of the sections above, I argued that my experience of being in the field physically has helped to make up for my "lost" time in the physical field, since 6 weeks of fieldwork is more beneficial than no time in the field at all.

My focus since returning from Majuro has been to spot recurring themes between my ethnography and other anthropologists' work. When reading through ethnographies from both Majuro, the Marshall Islands, and the Pacific region my research interest has evolved based on pre-field and post-field experiences. I focus on the connections between history, present events, and the possibilities of future events, exploring how these are connected through narratives about change. And as mentioned, I have applied the poetry of Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner repeatedly throughout the thesis because it has not only been used in the performance of activism, but it serves as a Marshallese narrative across the topics I discuss. These current topics or themes deal with change, history, crises, climate change, identity, land rights, and activism. I argue that a focus on such narratives are essential to recognize and gaining a greater understanding of life in both the Pacific and in the Marshall Islands. It can also create a common ground for collaboration between research, nations, and people, which might become even more important and a necessity in search to solve the climate crisis as suggested by Barnett and Campbell (2010:175-176).

Outline of the thesis

In chapter two, I will introduce the historical timeline of the Marshall Islands and discuss some key events, especially concerning the nuclear testing era and the climate crisis. Marshallese history can give insight into the various challenges and crises in the islands and explore how the Marshallese people have reacted, adapted, fought, and suffered, in other words: How they experience change, crises, and transformation in their islands. I discuss various perspectives on Marshallese history, and I consider empirical data based on my fieldwork but also other ethnographic writings from anthropological research in the Marshall Islands.

In chapter three, I elaborate on the historical approaches to Marshallese history through a perspective on material debris. Through the material expressions of the landscape, historical remnants make visible the continuity between past and present, in a ruination process of the island landscape. I explore how history is materialized through the island's landscape. In chapter four, I elaborate on materialized history by turning to the international climate change scene to explore how discourses about challenges and crises in the Marshall Islands have evolved as an academic focus, and on global arenas for climate justice. I also explore how Marshallese view their role in the chaos of challenges and crises through a historical perspective where the past, the present, and the future connect.

Chapter 2

“History Project”

At fifteen I decide
To do my history project
On nuclear testing in the Marshall Islands
Time to learn my own history

All on how the U.S. military once used
My island home
For nuclear testing
I sift through political jargon
Tables of nuclear weapons
With names like Operation Bravo
Crossroads
And Ivy
Quotes from American leaders like
90,000 people are out there.
Who Gives a damn?

Excerpt from “History Project” (Jetn̄il-Kijiner 2017:20)

A history of Challenges and Crises

The history of the Marshall Islands in terms of challenges and crises escalated since the first contact with the West - including explorers, colonialists, missionaries, and war machines. The Marshallese were once great seafarers and navigators, traveling across the ocean forging kinship ties, and power alliances, exploring and settling the scattered islands north of the Equator in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. The Marshall Islands are a combination of atoll islands and a vast coastline. The Marshallese people soon applied various skills to survive and later thrive in these low-lying coral atolls. Because of the coral foundation of atolls, opportunities for growing crops are limited. Therefore, the ocean became the primary source of nutrition and, ultimately, life in the Islands (Tobin 2002:1-2). In addition, the climate variations define life on an atoll - the islander's' close connection with their environment has been challenged throughout history. This chapter will introduce a timeline of events that have impacted Marshallese lifeways. I explore how these events are eventually processes of profound change in the Marshall Islands before I discuss two historical approaches to understand these processes, which are the foundation of narratives in the Marshall Islands today, especially in the face of new challenges such as the climate crisis. An historical analysis is always partial and selective, but I argue that the timeline I present below allows for a focus on change related to the environment which is eventually (as we will see), a significant part of the Marshallese identity and existence.

I am interested in studying the historical events that have taken place in the Marshall Islands, inspired by Michael Jackson's notions in "The Course of an Event" (2005), where he discusses how the interpretations and memories of events are applied through the meanings we prescribe them, and that this creates possibilities for the unfolding of future events. Jackson views past events as constantly connecting with the present and the future, in the sense that people's individual experiences and interpretations of events are different based on their personal stories (Jackson 2005:12-14). I will come back to this in my discussion in chapter four, on the various discourses that have evolved from the experiences and interpretations of historical events. First, it is necessary to go through the timeline of historical events in the Marshall Islands. In this chapter, I explore just that, the history of the Marshall Islands, and I ask; what meanings are applied to the narratives of past events in Marshallese history? How is the history of the past present in Marshallese everyday life today? What are the relationships between the Marshallese history and the conditions for and possibilities of future events? I wish to investigate foundational connections between past, present, and future through storytelling, and this will

become an essential argument in the chapters that follow. I will therefore start by outlining the history of the Marshall Islands to present some of the significant events, challenges, and crises that I will later explore concerning narratives and connections between past, present, and the future in the Marshallese context. Let me begin with an origin story of how the Islands came to be.

“Stories of origin”

The sail

That powers

The Marshallese canoe

Feeds our family

Fights our wars

Claims our land

Visits clans

Came from

A mother

Excerpt from the poem “Loktanur” (Jetñil-Kijiner 2017:6)

The Marshallese history includes several stories about the origin of the world. These are not stories sequenced through a specific timeline. Most of the ancient stories contain myths about the first Marshallese people, and the stories have been retold several times, orally throughout generations. The first descriptions of the Marshallese existence come from these stories. In Western history, the timeline of any Pacific Island is usually dated by the time Western explorers sailed on voyages of discovery and mapped the Pacific Ocean through their “first contact” with Pacific Islanders, and later the histories of the Marshall Islands have often been

told and projected in the view of an outside party, such as military control and war (Dvorak 2018:33-39). The tradition of oral storytelling is a critical path to knowledge throughout the Pacific. In the Marshall Islands, storytelling is referred to as *bwebwenato*, and traditionally storytelling sessions are led by a *ribwebwenato*, who is the primary storyteller, a representative from the elders of the community, who has the skill of retelling knowledge through stories from the ancient times in the islands (Tobin 2002:8-9). Even though this sharing of knowledge is passed down orally through generations, Jack Tobin (2002) traveled around the Marshalls in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s and collected some of the stories to put them into writing as preservation of essential Marshallese knowledge.

Through his collecting of stories, Tobin became aware of how traditional stories are adapted based on historical events and changes that occur and transform aspects of the stories in the retelling of them throughout the years. He also became familiar with how historical events and changes, accordingly, contribute to and influence people's memories through such storytelling. The time when Jack Tobin collected stories was marked by American militarization in the Islands. At this time, the transition of important knowledge and traditional skills from one generation to the next began to fade. The nuclear tests conducted by the United States resulted in the forced relocation of entire Marshallese communities. As a result, the generational gap between the knowledgeable elders and younger Marshallese occurred (Tobin 2002:8-11). Essential knowledge and traditional skills were no longer shared and passed down between generations, to the same extent as before. I will come back to this later¹⁴.

In *Stories from the Marshall Islands*, Tobin (2002) provides a repertoire of Marshallese origin stories, which I have compiled in the following summary. The origin of the Marshall Islands begins with four posts falling, creating the sky in the East, South, North, and West. Two men appear from the sky and begin creating the reef, rocks and, islands before humans are created. Later, the sea was created, flowing from each direction, before there were fish and finally birds, establishing all the beings belonging to the many seas and islands (Tobin 2002:11). Before all living beings were named, the two men created the art of tattooing, painting all the beings in

¹⁴ Jack Tobin was concerned with collecting traditional myths and stories to restore the important Marshallese histories, see Tobin (2002). Joseph Genz, as I will explain later, has documented the revitalization of Marshallese navigation and canoe building which had been kept secret and slowly disappeared because of the nuclear weapons testing and the subsequent relocation of communities, see Genz (2018).

the island universe, naming all the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, and humans, creating categories of different beings.

Food was brought to the islands by a woman who gave birth to a ripe coconut. After planting it and watching it grow, the coconut could be used for different things such as food, houses, clothes, and firewood, depending on the various stages of the growth process. The woman used parts of the coconut as a sennit line, she caught a bird in the sky, and once it fell to the ground. Due to the clearing of the sky, the humans received thoughts that resulted in the introduction of skills such as canoe building, the construction of houses, and the production and practice of medicine. Enlightenment came upon all people through the clearing of the sky (Tobin 2002:12-14). Later, the story describes the first canoe builders and navigators, and how the first six clans came to be, which created issues for the islanders. Clanship involved separation between community members. One woman insisted that despite being separated into various clans, everyone had to continue to work together and love each other. Finally, when everyone listened to her, people got along, and the sky remained clear during peaceful times. During the night when it got dark, stars would appear and make people less worried despite the darkness (Tobin 2002:14-15).

One time, after three days of darkness, new vegetation appeared on the islands and was named by the tattoo artists like all beings on the islands. The vegetation was then harvested, and again, the land was cultivated by the humans' which resulted in different seasons and weather patterns affecting the growth and the harvest of different foods such as breadfruit and pandanus (Tobin 2002:16-17). The humans were reminded on several occasions not to separate and create social distress. This was compared to the building of a large canoe and how no one can build a large canoe solely alone. It requires several people's contributions, and for them all to work together. The story also focuses on the preparations the first Marshallese made to prepare for a day when there would not be any crops left to harvest. This resulted in food preservation to secure their future in the islands (Tobin 2002:17).

This origin story outlines the foundational elements and values of social life in the Marshall Islands, in terms of how the Islands and the humans were created. I now wish to compare this story to the excerpt of the poem given above, "Loktanur" by Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner (2017:6). Both present and represent similar foundational qualities of social life in the Marshall Islands. The Marshallese sailed across the Pacific to fight wars, establish allies through matriarchal kinship ties, establish power over land, and eat from the land and ocean. The stories above are not only

myths - they include information and knowledge of important elements, figures, and values of life in the Marshall Islands (Tobin 2002:25-26).

The stories above are about how the islands originated and reflect how things came to be in the islands from the very beginning. The stories are also descriptions of important features of the 'Marshallese way', a discourse discussed by Peter Rudiak-Gould in *Climate Change and Tradition in a Small Island State: The Rising Tide* (2013). According to Rudiak-Gould, the Marshallese way is something Marshallese refer to when speaking about change and fundamental elements of living in the atoll islands, and he argues that the Marshallese discourse is characterized by such narratives, which he suggests can be viewed as efforts to come to terms with changes due to foreign contact and colonization (Rudiak-Gould 2013:21). The Marshallese way, as outlined by Rudiak-Gould defines the ideal way of life in the Marshall Islands, with the possibility of living a self-sufficient life from the resources available and offered by the land, ocean, and heaven (Rudiak-Gould 2013:21-26). Another element of the Marshallese way is to uphold social relationships through generosity. An example of this can be the metaphor of the large canoe in the origin story, that one cannot build a canoe alone, but as a community people are dependent on working together and to contribute with various skills to keep the peace (Tobin 2002:17).

The ideal way of life in the Marshall Islands is to be self-sufficient, and to maintain kinship ties and other important social bonds, which are reinforced by the last essential element of the Marshallese way: respect for chiefs and care of the land. These three elements represent the ideal Marshallese way (of life) (Rudiak-Gould 2013:22-23). I will briefly theorize the importance of the Marshallese connection to the land through Tim Ingold's perspective of globes and spheres (Ingold 1993a). The connection to land is part of fundamental elements of the Marshallese identity as described in the poem, the story, and through the "Marshallese way". It is, therefore, necessary to investigate this connection to understand the way historical processes and climate change existentially challenge the Marshall Islands.

Ingold's perspective of globes and spheres approaches how people's lived experiences are meaningful based on how they are experiencing their position in the world (Ingold 1993a:31-33). Through the perspective of spheres, Ingold describes how people experience living as a part of the world, and therefore in the perspective of spheres, people's experiences become embodied through their closeness of living as part of the landscape of where they find themselves. The perspective of globes is the opposite. From the perspective of globes, humans experience living on earth, and through dominance and construction of what they view as the

landscape (Ingold 1993a:31-33, 40-42). Now, if we study the poem again, the origin story along with Rudiak-Gould's notions of the Marshallese way, it can seem that the Marshallese ideal is achieved by applying a perspective of spheres. The Marshallese in these stories do not wish to construct their surroundings or environment, but by living within the environment, as a part of it, they can acquire the essential knowledge and resources in a balanced notion. Dwelling is another term discussed by Ingold in "The temporality of the landscape" (1993b:152). It describes how people live interconnected to the all-inclusive landscape. Hence, by dwelling in the world, the Marshallese relate to each other through lived experiences and interactions with the all-encompassing landscape which makes up the islands (Ingold 1993b:154-156).

I am not saying that the Marshallese adopt either a perspective of spheres or of globes, especially if we take into account how they traveled, explored, and conquered new islands, and quite often did so because they viewed it as a potential for power, because they viewed land to be the most valuable resource (Rudiak-Gould 2013:22-23). This is more like a perspective of globes. Despite this, when comparing and while disentangling the history through change, challenges, and crises, I wish to exemplify the "ideal" Marshallese way as a representation of a perspective of spheres, and the following actors partaking in the history of the Marshall Islands (which follows), as adopting the perspective of globes. The events I will present, therefore, challenge the perspective of spheres and rather represents a perspective of globes (Ingold 1993a).

I have already discussed the origin of the Marshall Islands and its people, and I will begin to introduce the historical timeline and present events that challenge the perspective of spheres and the Marshallese way of life. Even though the Marshallese way is only an ideal notion of life and does not refer to an actual time in history when life was this way, it still represents some essential elements of the way Marshallese are deeply connected to their landscape through stories of the past along with essential elements of what it means to be "Marshallese", or even a "Pacific Islander". Rudiak-Gould has argued that the ideal of the Marshallese way underlines how the Marshallese relate and refer to their past while going through processes of change (Rudiak-Gould 2013:21-39). This becomes significant in the discussion that follows later in this chapter. First, let's begin by introducing the historical timeline which is characterized by foreign contact and interests in the islands.

“A reef of memory”

During the European era of discovery, Spanish explorers sailed across the Pacific Ocean, and in the 16th century, the Spanish made their first appearance in the Micronesian region (Hezel 1983:1-4). The Marshall Islands became useful for Spanish explorers as pit stops to exchange necessary supplies for supporting long expeditions throughout the Pacific (Barker 2004:15-16). In the 18th century, British ships would begin sailing regularly throughout the Pacific Ocean. The Marshall Islands would appear on Western maps soon after the British Captain John William Marshall (hence the Marshall Islands) made a stop in the Islands after discharging British convicts in the new British colony of Australia during the event of “rediscovery”¹⁵ (Hezel 1983:63-65). The Marshall Islands’ location became essential for cross-Pacific travels and trading between Asia and America as it lies in the middle of the ocean between the two continents (Barker 2004:16). When exploring the history, the islands’ geographical placement remains significant up until today.

Later in the 18th century, missionaries arrived in the Pacific Islands and introduced Christian beliefs. They would soon convert the Marshall islanders. Christianity has remained a significant part of Marshallese identity ever since the missionaries first visited and brought change to the traditional beliefs in the islands, and several waves of missionaries have appeared in the islands to this day (Barker 2004:16, Rudiak-Gould 2013:20-21). Germany, Japan, and the United States have all had interests in the islands. Germany expanded their interest in the Marshall Islands due to the possibility of exploiting and commodifying the Marshallese copra¹⁶. The Germans even made treaties with several *irooj*¹⁷ (chief) in the Islands to secure their interests in the islands and this was the beginning of German colonist influence in the Marshalls (Hezel 1995:45-48). The copra production introduced a new type of labor, In the Marshall Islands, but also a shift in the power of the *irooj*. Marshallese self-sufficiency was challenged by the Germans’ wish to export the Marshallese copra, and in addition, people began working for money to provide for their families and communities, and not only working on specific land

¹⁵ I have put “rediscovery” in quotation marks because it is something that has been highly discussed in Pacific studies as a Eurocentric worldview, see Dvorak (2018:33-34). And later in the critique of the belittlement of Pacific Islands as isolated and small, see Hau’Ofa (1993). This discussion is also relevant for the later discussions I make about self-determination in chapter four. Also see Teaiwa (2018).

¹⁶ Copra is dried coconut meat that was used by Pacific Islanders before the Europeans extended its use in the production of cosmetics, oils, and other foods (Hezel 1983:210-211).

¹⁷ *Irooj* is the Marshallese term for chief. *Iroojlaplap* is a paramount chief (Dvorak 2018: xxvi).

where they had rights to be self-sufficient. The Germans also had to negotiate with the Marshallese *irooj* who had landholdings to be able to produce and later export the copra. This resulted in a new power for the *irooj*, because several of the *irooj* as noted by Hezel obtained the Germans' trust and respect, and therefore gained large salaries for their copra production and land use. Despite the German interests and introductions, the *irooj* remained as powerful landowners and the Germans' political involvement in the islands was minimal because the value of land was eventually more powerful than money (Hezel 1995:51-55).

In 1914 Japan began its mission of dominance in the Pacific during World War I (WWI) when Britain and Japan divided Micronesia between each other because of their alliance in the war against Germany. In addition, both Britain and Japan had large marines and naval ships, and both were sweeping over German colonies in the Pacific after defeating Germany. To prevent the possibility of conflict between the allies in the aftermath of the war, "representatives of the two nations signed a secret agreement "making the equator the operational dividing line between the Japanese and British naval forces"" (Hezel 1995:148). Hezel writes that the Japanese expansion after the WWI ended in 1914, offered Japan an advantage for control in the Pacific. Japan had already established Japanese businesses in the area and the Micronesian region offered Japan a military base, which would become critical for the Japanese expansion in the Pacific. Due to the American colonization of Hawai'i and the Philippines, whereas Micronesia lies between these two island groups, the intersection between Americans and Japanese would soon become impossible to avoid. Aware of this, both the Americans and the Japanese began preparing for a hypothetical war (Hezel 1995:146-149).

Japan's primary goal of colonization in the Marshall Islands regarded the geographical position of the islands. The Japanese began an economic development of resources as part of their colonization of the islands. During this time, the first public education system in the islands was installed, roads were built, and copra production increased. The Japanese would bring in modern commodities to convert the Marshallese into the needed economy to strategically "develop" the Marshall Islands. Therefore, the Japanese would take more governmental control in the Islands to control the establishments they had built. The Japanese development in the islands resulted in a significant distinction between the local islanders and the Japanese foreigners. The Marshallese began starving as they could no longer access their local produce or retain the skills to stay self-sufficient (Barker 2004:17 Hezel 1995:151-153). At the same time, the tensions and the imperial race between the Japanese and the United States increased militarization in the Islands. In an agreement discussed and developed in the period between

1920 to 1922, through the League of Nations¹⁸, the Americans agreed to let the Japanese control the Micronesian region, only if the United States were to control the Yap islands to the west in the region. This agreement resulted in Americans' open water access¹⁹ to Micronesia and the Japanese promise to not militarize Micronesia and marked the beginning of the tense relationship between Japan and the United States (Hezel 1995:155-156).

In the following years, the Americans and Japanese became more secretive and restrained from discussing their business and actions in the Pacific. The secrecy of Japan's activities in the Marshall Islands had fueled the suspicions of United States, and they would begin to spy on Japanese operations (Hezel 1995:157-161). Japan expanded its military regime during its long-lasting war with China and in the time leading up to World War II, and this affected the life of the Micronesian islanders. Islanders had to work and assist the Japanese, they had to give up their land to the Japanese military, and they were underpaid and underfed under the Japanese power for military control (Hezel 1995:214-224). The tensions between the United States and Japan increased as World War II approached. On December 7, 1941, Japanese military forces attacked the American naval base, Pearl Harbor in Hawai'i. The causes that sparked this historical attack have been widely discussed by historians (Sagan 1988:893-894).

The attack on Pearl Harbor triggered the Pacific War between the U.S. and Japan, as their involvement in the World War played out in the Pacific. The attacks between the U.S. and Japan in the Pacific began in the South Pacific in 1942, which led to a reinforced Japanese military control in Micronesia as the region would play a strategic role later in the Pacific war (Hezel 1995:221-223). In the lead-up to the U.S. attacks in Micronesia, the islanders in the region were forced to work for the Japanese in the preparations against enemy assaults. The first U.S. attacks on the Japanese in Micronesia started in 1944, and the Marshall Islands marked one of the last front lines in the war as the islands, especially Kwajalein (Where the Japanese naval base was located), became a battlefield (Hezel 1995:226-228).

Kwajalein Atoll was one of many battlegrounds of the Pacific War which had resulted in hundreds of thousands of military casualties. Pacific Islanders also lost their lives as the

¹⁸ The League of Nations was an international organization developed after World War I to secure world peace (Weaver, "League of Nations." *Encyclopedia.com*).

¹⁹ This Open Water Access gave the United States the right to access Yap and its cable stations along with the U.S. commercial vessels entrance into Micronesian waters and the right to holland in the mandated islands (Hezel 1995:156).

combined war machines of Japan and the United States rolled over their atolls (Dvorak 2018:103-107, Hezel 1995:227-229,241). The Pacific War resulted in the U.S. seizing control over the Marshall Islands when defeating Japan. The end of World War II and the American nuclear attack on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, showed the power and the destruction of nuclear weapons when more than 200,000 civilians lost their lives due to radiation exposure (Duple et al. 2011:S122). Yet the development and testing of nuclear weapons would continue throughout the cold war, and the Marshall Islands would be the main location for the U.S. participation in this run against the Soviet Union (Genz 2018:86-87).

The Pacific war resulted in various narratives of the participants of the dramatic war. In the United States, for instance, Greg Dvorak describes how the war was celebrated as a victory and liberation of the Marshall Islanders from the Japanese. In Japan, on the other hand, Japanese families mourned the lives of all the soldiers who had died in battles for their country (Dvorak 2018:113-120, 160-166). Because of the strict Japanese regime in the islands ever since World War I, many of the Marshallese experienced the American victory as relief in a way that it perhaps brought new hopes to the islanders after the suffering during the Japanese time. But it would also establish a “special relationship²⁰” between the U.S. and the Marshall Islands (Dvorak 2018:142-156). The Pacific War is a turning point when speaking of challenges and crises in the Marshall Islands. – However, despite the Marshallese’s relief and the view of the American military as heroes close after the ending of the war, this relationship would soon take a new turn. While the horrific memories from the war turned the Marshall Islands into a war zone graveyard, and while the Marshall Islanders assisted the U.S. military in the cleaning of the mess and the restoration of the islands, the U.S. was already in the process of establishing a new military control in the islands (Dvorak 2018:107-109,135-138, Hezel 1995:229).

²⁰ I adopt Dvorak’s term “special relationship” which he applied to describe the relationship between the U.S. and the RMI, see Dvorak (2018:153-156).

“For the good of Mankind”

I flip through snapshots
Of American marines and nurses branded
White with bloated grins sucking
Beers and tossing beach balls along
Our shores
And my islander ancestors, cross-legged
Before a general listening
To his fairy tale
About how it's
For the good of mankind
To hand over our islands
Let them blast
Radioactive energy
Into our sleepy coconut trees
Our sagging breadfruit trees
Our busy fishes that sparkle like new sun
Into our coral reefs
Brilliant as an aurora borealis woven
Beneath a glassy sea
God will thank you they told us

Excerpt from “History Project” (Jetn̄il-Kijiner 2017:21)

During the period 1946 to 1958, the United States exploited the Marshall Islands as a testing site for the U.S. Nuclear Weapons Testing Program. Again, the islands' location was strategically important, this time as being "isolated²¹" from the rest of the world, which gave the Americans an advantage to test their nuclear weapons strategically and closed off from the world throughout the nuclear race against the Soviet Union. The Marshall Islands had a low rate of inhabitants and was surrounded by water which led the Americans to believe (or claim) that the tests would not lead to any extended damages (Genz 2018:86-87). During this decade, the U.S. detonated 67 atomic bombs on Marshallese land and in the ocean, affecting resources, and people's health and even causing death while bringing cultural changes and political uprisings to the islands. The Marshall Islands was at this time part of the Micronesian U.S. Trust Territory assigned by the United Nations in 1947 when the Marshalls was designated as a strategic territory to the U.S., the U.S. had signed a promise to protect the health and well-being of the islanders as well as to protect them against loss of land and resources (Barker 2004:20). When the United States gained control over the former Japanese territory in the newly formed Trust Territory, they ensured their pledge to oppose colonialism by avoiding applying the terms such as sovereignty and annexation in the document. The Marshall Islands eventually was part of the U.S. "strategic trusteeship" in Micronesia, where the United States obtained military control (Hezel 1995:255-257).

In the time after World War II, the U.S. created a foundation for a new form of economy in the islands, while the establishment of urban areas on certain islands affected migration to these places with the introduction and development of supermarkets, movie theaters, and restaurants (Hezel 2001:39-40). People began migrating to urban islands, such as Kwajalein Atoll and Majuro Atoll. The social life on these urban atolls were different from the social life in the outer atolls, where people continue to live more "traditional," keeping elements of self-sufficiency (Hezel 2001:140-141). The 1960s and the 1970s was a time of political uprisings in the islands of the Trust Territory in the Micronesian region. Due to an increasing economy and welfare of the islands in the Trust Territory, and in addition to the consequences and reactions of the American militarization of the territory, the islands all began separating into multiple political units, while establishing the Congress of Micronesia in the middle of 1960. In 1978 the islands of the Congress were granted self-rule and split into three sovereign states: the Republic of the Marshall Islands, The Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), and the

²¹ To describe Pacific Islands as isolated is a highly discusses discourse in later years, see Hau'ofa (1993)

Republic of Palau. Micronesia under the US Trust Territory had been characterized by a colonial presence that had continued to enforce “development”, militarization, exploitation, and capitalism (Hezel 2001:4-5). The political sovereignty therefore marks an important turning point in Micronesian history. Nevertheless, the U.S. exploitation of land, people, ocean, and resources is a horrific story, which has enduring effects on the Marshallese to this day.

The U.S. military persuaded Marshallese islanders to relocate from their islands while exploiting their Christian faith to be good humans that had been taught to them by Christians by the missionaries. To enhance the islander’s trust and respect, the military reinforced their Christian beliefs and values when negotiating with the *irooj* and the people. The U.S. military convinced the islanders that they would help bring peace and freedom to the world if they let the U.S. military use their islands to experiment further nuclear weapons and stated that it would be “for the good of mankind and to end all world wars” (Hezel 1995:271). Eventually, as noted, before, the United States used the Marshall Islands as a testing site for nuclear weapons, without properly informing the islanders, and rather confirming religious beliefs rather than the actual truth (Barker 2004:20-23).

“Castle Bravo” was one of the world’s largest thermonuclear weapons, and it was dropped above Bikini Atoll on March 1st in 1954 (Hezel 1995:273). The force of this detonation vaporized coral atoll and seawater into a giant mushroom of radioactive fallout which spread to the nearby atolls, where American military personnel was already evacuated, but the Marshallese were left and experienced fallout raining down on their islands and in their lagoons and ocean (Genz 2018:87). Hezel describes how the ash from the shot fell on the nearby Rongelap island where people had remained. Not long after being covered by radioactive waste, the Rongelapse began to experience skin burns, vomiting, and illnesses due to the contamination. (Hezel 1995:273-274) The intense tests throughout the years have been compared to the Hiroshima bombing, which killed several thousand due to radiation exposure in 1945 (Douple et al. 2011:S122). “Overall, the net yield of the nuclear testing in the Marshall Islands was equivalent to dropping 7,200 Hiroshima-sized bombs, or 1.6 Hiroshima bombs every day for twelve years” (Genz 2018:86). The Marshallese experience during this decade has affected the coming generations in the Marshall Islands, and every year on March 1st, victims of the nuclear testing are remembered on the Nuclear Victims Remembrance Day.

The main event on this day is the parade into the town park in Majuro. In addition, people prepare for the day and highlighting the importance of the day ahead. Students organize

workshops and various events around the time of the Nuclear Victims Remembrance Day to highlight the importance of history. I attended one of these events, a mini-museum where students presented posters and information about the nuclear effects in the Islands and stories from witnesses and survivors. I would learn about stories that entailed tremendous trauma because, during the American nuclear testing, the Marshallese had no idea of how they were directly affected by being exposed to radiation. In addition to remembering the victims, and their families, the mini-museum projected a large collective trauma of severe challenges from the continuous injustices of the nuclear decade in the islands. Through speeches, poetry, and music at the event, it became clear that the people involved did not view their fight for nuclear justice as over.

Following the severe consequences of radiation, several of the contaminated islands including Enewetak, Rongelap, Bikini, and Utrik became uninhabitable due to radiation exposure. Entire communities had to relocate to other atolls and islands (Genz 2018:86-98, Rudiak-Gould 2013:19-20). Yet, the nuclear fallout had already contaminated people's bodies, leading to illnesses, long-lasting health implications, and even death. Another part of the nuclear testing program includes the American interest in researching nuclear radiation's effects on humans, land, and resources. The Marshallese were researched without knowing about the project or their radiation exposure. The research of human reactions to radiation conducted by American medical doctors was intended to research the effects of radiation and not to treat the injured and sick islanders under the name of "Project 4.1" (Yamada 2004:217).

"Project 4.1" was an extended part of the American military nuclear weapons testing in the Marshall Islands. It was a medical program investigating and comparing the effects of human (Marshallese) exposure to nuclear radiation. Yamada notes in his article "Cancer, reproductive abnormalities, and diabetes in Micronesia: the effect of nuclear testing" (2004) that during the relocation of the Rongelap people back to their home island after stating that it was safe, people were already exposed to radiation, and others who were not were researched. This resulted in radiation exposure by both the exposed Rongelap and the non-exposed. They got exposed to radiation due to the already contaminated locally grown foods on Rongelap. "Project 4.1" only examined the Rongelap population, yet the other contaminated populations of the Marshall Islands have also experienced health effects due to radiation exposure (Yamada 2004:216-221).

American medical doctors also revealed increased, long-lasting effects such as leukemia and thyroid cancer, over 12 years after the exposure to nuclear radiation. Exposure to nuclear radiation made the Marshallese sick, and their skin would burn and fall off. In addition, the

exposed women experienced reproductive implications such as stillbirths, miscarriages, giving birth to jellyfish babies, an abnormal birth of deformed fetuses (Yamada 2004:217-218). Yamada also discusses how various more recent health implications and illnesses in the Marshall Islands are connected to radiation exposure, such as obesity. He also states that health implications have occurred due to the introduction of alcohol, drugs, new dietary foods, modern commodities, and increased economic and social changes (Yamada 2004:219).

As noted, before, the land is the most valuable resource for the people in the Marshall Islands. When families and communities were relocated to new islands and atolls, most people did not obtain land rights in these new places. Dvorak has also noted that as a result, the political structures of people in the diaspora were challenged, along with multiple other challenges which comes with a new and more overcrowded place (Dvorak 2018:55-58,171-179). The loss of land has caused communities to live in exile from their home islands (Barker 2004:67, Genz 2018:94). Traditional knowledge is an essential element of how the Marshallese have survived on the atoll islands for so long. By acquiring the necessary knowledge through living sustainably from the ocean, sky, and land, the Marshallese lifestyle adapted and developed over time (Rudiak-Guold 2013:22-23). As noted by Genz entire communities lost their entire social infrastructure to continue the sharing of knowledge and the possibility of adopting skills in their familiar environment that are important to acquire specific skills such as navigation (Genz 2018:6, 94). The loss of land has not only entailed the loss of resources and knowledge, but it has impacted the entire Marshallese social life.

Knowledge and traditions are passed down to the next generation orally. Jack Tobin (2002:9) notes how folklore has played an essential role in providing generations of Marshallese with knowledge about their environment and learning the foundational behaviors such as social obligations, and interpersonal behaviors, through social relationships. To live in a certain area required specific skills, which were acquired through living within that area. Because of this, the challenges in communities who were forced away from their home islands increased. Certain traditions and knowledge were lost in the process of establishing a new relationship with an unfamiliar landscape²². Another challenge has been the generational gap between the older generations who remember and feel connected to their home islands, while the younger

²² This is explored by both Dvorak (2018) and Genz (2018) where Marshallese were forced to relocate from their home islands and had to establish a new life and community in a new place. In addition, both Dvorak and Genz explore further the various challenges due to this forced relocation.

generations have less or no memory and connection to this home. This then has affected the transmission of knowledge and skills between generations. Tobin has also argued that the introduction of the educational system and television affected younger generations' wish or "need" to learn Marshallese knowledge and skills based on traditional storytelling (Tobin 2002:9).

An example of such passing of traditional knowledge that was challenged and almost lost in the Marshall Islands due to the nuclear tests and the forced relocation of island communities is presented in Joseph Genz's book *Breaking the Shell* (2018). Genz's fieldwork documents the learning process of two Marshallese men, both forced to migrate from their home islands of Rongelap and Bikini, and their journey to revitalize traditional knowledge in the post-nuclear time. Due to the forced relocation of communities and the nuclear contamination of islands, some people in the Marshall Islands still live in exile from their home islands, and since the relocation, essential skills and knowledge have been lost or kept secret (Genz 2018:4-5,94).

Canoe building and sailing, navigating the lagoon and the ocean, and further through the many atolls of the Marshall Islands had been important skills of the people of Rongelap Atoll. Navigation was also an essential part of the Rongelap infrastructure and an opportunity to collect food from outer islands and to fish from the sea, and it ultimately represented the Rongelap lifestyle (Genz 2018:86-94). In the process of learning and obtaining the skills and the knowledge of a navigator, the apprentice needs to study wave patterns and weather formations (among other phenomenon) to embody knowledge about the ocean which is required to navigate throughout it later. The whole learning process involves a high level of secrecy because traditionally the canoe builders and navigators were highly ranked within the hierarchy of the political and social system in the Marshall Islands. The skills and knowledge of canoe builders and navigators were passed down and taught from one generation to another in a hereditary way of securing specific traditional knowledge and skills for the coming generations (Genz 2018:65-68,163-167).

Because several Marshallese islanders live in exile from their home islands to this day, their connections to land, and eventually their entire identity has been challenged. People have lost important ways of life by not being able to live and cultivate their land, or to learn from experiences of living in a specific place. Another result, Genz argues is the changes in social organization of several communities throughout the Islands, along with the psychological and physical traumas of relocation and radiation, effects of the U.S. nuclear testing which have become embedded into the collective memory of the generations of Marshall Islanders still

today (Genz 2018:4-6). Throughout *Breaking the Shell* (2018), Genz highlights how essential Marshallese knowledge and skills was lost, while some (mostly navigation and canoe building) have been revitalized through the collective traumas and collective memories of the Marshallese to bring back the lost knowledge, and important elements of the Marshallese identity. I will explore storytelling and revitalization in a discussion later in this thesis regarding a discussion on discourse and activism. Nevertheless, stories, experiences, and personal narratives are important parts of the continuation of the processes of change, the Marshallese history, and identity.

Nuclear legacy and the fight against climate change

The traumas and consequences of the nuclear tests removed people from their homes and caused long-lasting health effects such as cancer and reproductive issues. It also led to the loss of family members and friends, loss of land, and loss of knowledge and tradition. Collective memories about the nuclear age in the Islands are evident today in the way that they are embedded within people's personal stories, the RMI politics, the island landscape, and the relationship between the Marshall Islands and the United States. These collective memories become visible through the narratives of challenges about living under the present dual-threat that the nuclear times still constitute along with the threats of climate change.

The Marshallese have fought for nuclear justice and the U.S. government's accountability to take full responsibility for the horrific treatment of injustice towards Marshallese land and people. In 1982 the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) became the official name of the sovereign island state (Barker 2004:29). The RMI developed its constitution while negotiating to prove the injustices caused by the U.S. nuclear testing program. These negotiations were in partnership with the United Nations (UN). After several debates and research proving the American government and military's injustices during the trusteeship over the islands. In 1983 the Compact of Free Association (COFA) was signed by the United States and the RMI, but it did not come into effect until 1986 (Barker 2004:29-31). The FSM and Palau are also COFA nations. The COFA states that instead of continuing the U.S. trusteeship in Micronesia, a category of political affiliation was developed instead²³. This political affiliation included the close military alliance between the U.S. and the RMI, and the right of Marshallese to travel,

²³ More about the negotiations in the process of developing the Compact of Free Association, see Hezel (1995:331-367).

live, work, and go to school freely in both countries without obtaining a visa (Barker 2004:30, Genz 2018:193). The COFA also includes the “177 Agreement”, stating that the U.S. government needs to be held accountable for the damages to land and people in the RMI. “Under the 177 Agreement, the U.S. government provided the Marshall Islands with \$150 million for all past, present, and future damages and injuries resulting from the nuclear weapons testing program” (Barker 2004:30). By obtaining a compact such as the COFA, the RMI and the U.S. managed to fulfill national interests while obtaining a “special relationship” as noted by Dvorak (2018:215-216). The historical events that had taken place just decades earlier. Either way, the Marshallese are not necessarily contained with this agreement and as I will explore, the Marshallese continue to view their relationship with the U.S. as “special.”

The Marshall Islanders have continued to fight for nuclear justice and to argue that the U.S. still has not admitted their total involvement or taken accountability for the unfair consequences since their nuclear detonations and research in the 1940s and -50s. There have been several renegotiations between the U.S. and the Marshall Islands regarding the COFA and the leasing of land to the U.S. on Kwajalein Atoll²⁴. “Operation homecoming” was the extended protests by the Marshallese that made it possible to renegotiate the COFA on the issue of the RMI, the U.S., and the U.S. military base (Genz 2018:101). The COFA and the land use disputes are a few of many issues between the U.S. and the RMI in what makes up their “special relationship” (Dvorak 2018:215-216). Another important fight for nuclear justice, and another issue between the RMI and U.S. was the discovery of contamination levels in the 14 Northernmost islands, where islanders argue to have been affected by nuclear radiation. However, the U.S. government only declared 4 out of these 14 atolls as damaged from the nuclear tests: Bikini, Rongelap, and Enewetak as uninhabitable. Yamada described how several types of cancer outside of the RMI, in the Micronesian region have appeared, and, suspecting that due to eastward wind patterns, the radiation could have spread throughout an even extended unregistered area (Yamada 2004:218).

As a result, several argue that this has caused a division in the compensation scheme by the American government, whereas some island administrations are left with more money than others who also have a basis to argue for compensation for the destruction of resources but are not recognized by the U.S. (Barker 2004:33-49 Genz 2018:101, Hezel 1995:330-331). As noted by Hezel “The occasional clamors for compensation were no doubt justified, but no cash

²⁴ See Dvorak (2018:207-232).

payment would ever repair the real damage that had been done” (Hezel 1995:330). The Marshallese continue to fight for nuclear justice while at the same time facing new challenges such as epidemics, a pandemic (Covid-19), and climate change. In a conversation I had with a respected *ribwebwenato* in Majuro, who explained that there is a connection between the challenges of the Marshall Islands because of how change has affected and keeps affecting several aspects of social life in the Marshall Islands simultaneously.

The *ribwebwenato* explained the connection between nuclear waste and climate change. Nuclear waste was collected by the American military in a clean-up operation and covered by a concrete dome. The dome is referred to as Runit Dome, due to its location on the island of Runit in the Enewetak Atoll (Gerrard 2015:88). The *ribwebwenato* explained that the Runit dome is a threat to the Marshall Islands because of increasing sea-level rise caused by climate change, the dome can crack and the nuclear waste inside the Runit dome can leak into the ocean²⁵. In addition, the *ribwebwenato* explained how new viruses such as Covid-19 (which at the time was new but had begun to spread across the globe) are connected to climate change and described to me that the Marshallese are vulnerable due to their health and have underlying illnesses and low health capacity due to health complications related to the exposure of nuclear radiation he expressed. I argue that this sums up the complexity of the Marshall Islands’ history.

“History Project”

Exploring the history of the Marshall Islands reveals several changes in social life for the Marshallese, while it also reveals the complexity of the processes of change in the islands. I will now introduce two approaches to explore the history of the Marshall Islands further, and to gain more insight into the complexity of the Marshallese history. What follows is a discussion on an attempt to understand the distinction between the past, the present, and the future in Marshallese narratives.

Let me begin by presenting Peter Rudiak-Gould’s approach to Marshallese history, which focuses on the American militarization in the Marshall Islands, after World War 2 and the Pacific war against Japan. In his book, *Climate change and tradition in a Small Island State; The rising tide* (2013). Rudiak-Gould is interested in exploring how the Marshallese people

²⁵ The story about Runit Dome and sea-level rise would repeat itself through conversations with students, youth activists, and others. I bring it back up in my discussion of Runit Dome and material debris in chapter three.

relate to their history through change that is often referred to as modernization. However, modernization, Rudiak-Gould argues, is defined mostly by the American period and presence in the islands since the 1940s. Rudiak-Gould notes how the Marshallese often speak about their history in relation to a time of Marshallese versus American despite other foreign contact and colonization. This breach in history is defined in a distinction between the time before modernity arrived in the islands, the time of tradition, and the Marshallese way. This approach to the history of the Marshall Islands discusses how the Marshallese refer to life in the modern time (the colonial and post-colonial time including the presence), as an American opposed to the Marshallese way (The traditional life in the Islands) (Rudiak-Gould 2013:21-39).

Rudiak-Gould's main argument regarding the Marshallese conceptualization of the present time is how the Marshallese traditional "paradise," and the Marshallese way are viewed as lost and replaced by modernity or an American way of life. "Marshallese is for them (the Marshallese), defined by its fundamental, diametric difference from foreign and modern lifeways" (Rudiak-Gould 2013:25). Even though the Marshallese dealt with foreigners in their islands long before the Americans arrived, Rudiak-Gould focuses on the "Americanization" of the islands due to the American presence in the Islands, while he also mentions how the Marshallese fear the growing Chinese presence in the islands (Rudiak-Gould 2013:25-27). The American development in the islands distance islanders from their Marshallese way of life, especially the American introduction of a cash economy. The dependence on cash has challenged the fundamental elements of the Marshallese way of life by making people dependent on this new sustenance. In contrast to growing food and fishing, people now buy food, instead of sharing and being generous, money makes people greedy (Rudiak-Gould 2013:26).

The statements Rudiak-Gould has collected from Marshallese which addresses the changes and abrupt events of their history represent the distinction between past and present and even future remarks based on what is not acknowledged to be Marshallese but introduced and foreign, often in a discourse romanticizing the past, and that everything was better *before* (Rudiak-Gould 2013:26-29). And he reflects upon this in his conclusion about the process of modernity in the RMI can eventually become a more significant threat to the Marshallese society than climate change can become in the future. This argument is based on the diverse Marshallese relationships and discourses surrounding change, climate, and tradition which are expressed through the narratives of modernity, such as the Marshallese notions of a past, pre-colonial

times, as better than *now* (Rudiak-Gould 2013:184-185). This reflects the breach of the time when modernity arrived in the islands.

Rudiak-Goulds' theory of modernity exemplifies the effort to break down the complexity of the Marshallese history through the narrative of a trickster. Modernity the trickster, Rudiak-Gould discusses, is an embodied concept of the mythical character *Letao*, whom which is a recurring character in Marshallese stories. *Letao* is known to switch between having good and bad intentions, consequentially leaving humans with different opinions about him and his actions (Rudiak-Gould 2013:31). Rudiak-Gould argues that American modernity represents the trickster *Letao* in modern times or that *Letao* has taken the form of American modernity. Modernity the trickster then impacts the Marshallese views of the American presence in the Marshall Islands just like *Leato*'s actions in mythical stories. An example of this was how the Marshallese viewed the Americans as their saviors after the end of the Pacific war. However, the Marshallese view of the American introduction of modernity was viewed as the destruction of Marshallese culture and their island paradise. And at the same time, the Marshallese would blame themselves and each other for welcoming the changes. These views are contradictions based on the Marshallese experience from their history of challenges and change, and most importantly the revelations of historical events in the post-nuclear time. Rudiak-Gould exemplifies such contradictions through various statements Marshallese have made and their connections to the mythical character and stories of *Leato* (Rudiak-Gould 2013:33-36).

Genz mentions a similar narrative about the Marshallese view of the Americans after the 'liberation'²⁶ of the Pacific War. He notes that after the Pacific War, the Marshallese began to view the Americans in a chiefly manner and that they saved the Marshallese from *Etao*²⁷ who had traveled across several islands in the Marshalls and even Kiribati. Stories describe how the American military captured *Etao* in a bottle and eventually tapped into the ancient powers of *Etao* which could explain the destruction of the American bombings of the islands. With this mythological connection to historical events and the Marshallese view of American presence in the islands, Genz notes that the experiences of the nuclear tests would be understood as *Etao*'s

²⁶ The discourse of the American liberation of the Marshallese from Japan has been discussed earlier in this chapter along with the various perspectives of the participants of this event. Also see Dvorak (2018:113-120, 160-166).

²⁷ Both Genz and Rudiak-Gould are referring to the same mythical trickster in Marshallese legends and stories, it is only a variation in the spelling of *Etao* and *Leato*.

immense power of destruction, and this could also be applied to other changes and Marshallese traditional decline (Genz 2018:73-74).

In the approach of modernity, the trickster, Rudiak-Gould attempts to make sense of the contradicting views that have occurred through the memories and experiences of historical events and change. The narrative about modernity the trickster reveals the complex history of the Marshall Islands. Rudiak-Gould (2013:21) has also argues that contemporary Marshallese discourse can be understood as the Marshallese effort to “come to terms” with their history of social change. Although, American modernity can be one of the forces that have impacted the Marshallese society, in a way that it has introduced new things and modern modes and ways of society. Still, the Marshallese have also internalized these processes and adapted them into their meanings and actions, which is ultimately part of being a trickster. The contradicting understandings of coming to terms with history is apparent in the Marshallese climate activism as well in how past, present, and future challenges and crises are interpreted and connected, I, therefore, come back to this when discussing the various discourses and roles Marshallese represent in the global climate change scene in chapter four.

The historical approach discussed above presents a dichotomic approach to the past and the present, with a division between tradition and modernity, Marshallese and American. I now wish to introduce another approach to the historical processes of change in the Islands, by discussing Greg Dvorak’s perspective of “coral and concrete” (2018). Dvorak is interested in memories about the past, personal narratives, and histories of people who feel connected to the Marshall Islands, specifically Japanese, Americans, and of course Marshallese. He researches the histories of the deeper connections in the islands as processes of change. The book *Coral and Concrete* (2018) explores the variations of relationships that make up the Marshall Islands. Dvorak outlines the foundational essence of life in the Marshall Islands like Rudiak-Guold’s descriptions of the Marshallese way, which contains the importance of relationships such as upholding kinship ties by navigating across the sea and islands to exchange various goods (Rudiak-Gould 2013:16-17). Relationships, Dvorak notes were also the fundamental element of the social power structures in the islands, which are based in the matriarchal heritage of land (Dvorak 2018:58-60). Despite wars and conflicts, the introduction of religion by the missionaries, and later colonization and militarization challenged these relationships, some relationships faded, while new relationships were established between Marshallese and others (Dvorak 2018:27-30,233-235).

Coral and concrete are the metaphors that Dvorak applies to describe the various viewpoints, understandings, and memories in his historical approach to the Marshall Islands (Dvorak 2018:30-32). Coral is described not only as the geological coral atoll in the history of its creation, but Dvorak describes it as the foundational layer of historical events in the Marshall Islands as well. He compares the coral polyps that have traveled the ocean to settle in the Marshall Islands reef atolls to the various humans who have come across the ocean to settle, colonize, militarize, and evolve in the islands. Coral also represents the various narratives and stories in the islands, and Dvorak focuses on the participants of the historical drama and how they are connected through the network of the atoll chain. The stories can be personal, and Dvorak argues that they are connected to a larger network of power structures that have evolved in the islands through history (Dvorak 2018:21-25). Even though Dvorak's focus is on the island of Kwajalein and the American military base, I believe that the key elements in his approach can be applied to the whole of the Marshall Islands because of its focus on how the social relationships are connected through the islands and the ocean which surrounds them (The landscape).

The missionization, colonization, militarization, and nuclearization are the new layers of the concrete history of the Marshall Islands. Concrete is the other metaphor introduced by Dvorak and is described as the process of how the local histories of the participants in the total historical drama are formed by layers of concrete narratives of "truth" and "realness", which represents the interest in global and national politics, and literary can seem to fade the complexity of deep connections such as the coral- the atoll genealogies and relationships (Dvorak 2018:25-27,30-35). When comparing this approach to Rudiak-Gould's perspective, concrete can be seen as equivalent to modernity and coral as equivalent to tradition. Yet in Dvorak's approach, the processes of coral (tradition) and concrete (modernity) are unveiled as more complex and intertwined instead of presenting something in opposition to each other. The layers of both coral and concrete are in Dvorak's perspective parts of a total process of change, whereas the coral and concrete layers add to each other and through this interconnect and interact with each other (Dvorak 2018:27-32). Dvorak is interested in how the past is remembered and how it has evolved into new meanings in the present through these interconnected, complex layers of coral and concrete, through people's narratives and participation in processes of change (Dvorak 2018:29).

"Concept metaphors" are an analytical tool that is "good to think with", to make sense of complex contexts (Moore 2004). In the two approaches to the Marshallese history presented

above, both Rudiak-Gould and Dvorak apply such concept metaphors to make sense of the complexity of the historical drama in the Marshall Islands such as tradition/ modernity and coral/concrete. The metaphors are applied to the historical context of the Marshall Islands, yet Rudiak-Gould and Dvorak's use of tradition/modernity and coral/concrete represent two different approaches to the processes of change in the Islands. Both are based on how Marshall Islanders speak of their experiences and the relation of these over time, ever since the first settlers arrived in the Islands. Based on observations from my fieldwork I recognize the connection islanders make to *Manit*, which means culture in Marshallese. This connection is often traditionally embedded and often refers to the pre-colonial times in the islands, such as seen in Rudiak-Gould's descriptions as well, when he refers to a commentator in the local newspaper speaking about the removal of the *t* in *manit*, becoming *mani* instead which represents money, it is no longer about culture only money (Rudiak-Gould 2013:30).

Manit is often described in contrast to the present with a reference to stories from or about the past. For instance, one person told me that "we have no culture anymore," and went on to explain how the food they eat today has been introduced and that Marshallese didn't use to eat this type of food such as canned foods or noodles, adding that nowadays people only prepare traditional foods on certain special occasions. It was also explained that the Marshallese have adopted the drinking of *kava* and the chewing of *betel nut* which are introduced to the Marshall Islands. *Kava* and *betel nut* are therefore not considered to be Marshallese. People also discussed how they observed their fellow Marshallese to be "abusing" *kava's* traditional ceremonial use, stating that Marshallese don't use it in the proper way as they do in Fiji where it originates from. Teens would often speak about how they would feel "drugged" from chewing *betel nut* or drinking *kava*, which could also be part of what they were referring to as "abuse", even though the feeling of intoxication is one of the effects of drinking *kava*. "Abuse" could also refer to what is not Marshallese custom or *manit*. Although I believe this then, contradicts the "we have no culture anymore" statement because that statement is in a way based on the notion of something that is eventually not Marshallese *manit*.

The present context is compared to the past in a dichotomic way of tradition/modernization or even *manit/* culture and, no *manit* / no culture, yet it also shows how Marshallese have internalized "modernity" and applied new names and meanings to introduced elements depending on the context. It is also interesting that the example of "introduced" customs as mentioned *kava* and beetle nut, are important customs in other Pacific traditions such as the *kava* in Fiji and the *betel nut* in Papua New Guinea. The example could most likely have been

alcohol or tobacco which has also impacted the Marshallese health and community problems such as drinking and driving for example. The comparison of what is not part of Marshallese culture then refers to introduced and adapted traditions of other Pacific Islands, not necessarily only American (or Chinese). Yet, this is perhaps another example of what Rudiak-Gould would call “contradicting”, because the Marshallese realize that they are adopting another “culture”, at the same time they are distancing themselves to it by referring to a breach in the history of what life used to be, and to what is Marshallese and what is not. There is an interaction between what is Marshallese and what is not, and this might be part of the deeper relationships Dvorak (2018) describes. *Kava* and *betel nut* represent new layers to the Marshallese history, which is connected to Pacific migration and movement between islands and across regions, which is part of a shared Pacific identity of connections across the Pacific Ocean (Hau’ofa 1993).

Time, Change, and Crises

Change is part of a process of continuity whereby the Marshallese connect the past to the present when referring to the past in narratives, and when applying new meanings to the context of the present. It is not as if the islanders are not aware of their active role in welcoming change or even denying it, change would not have happened unless the islanders reacted to it in one way or another. How can anthropology study change as it is a continuous process, ongoing, and sometimes not identifiable at first glance? How can we understand and draw out specific processes of where change takes place through a historical timeline? Jackson (2005) has argued that it is impossible to pinpoint the exact time at which something changes in any given society, but that by looking at the events that have taken place over time and people’s memories and narratives of events, it is possible to get insights into how certain structural changes in a certain society have developed and why. In studying the historical timeline of events in the Marshall Islands I hope to get insights into how the society has evolved, especially due to several abrupt events which have threatened the foundational societal structures and ways of life for people in the Marshall Islands. To explore the historical processes of change in the islands further, I will adapt the theoretical approach of studying history as a “Rite of passage” (Turner 1969).

Victor Turner argues that in a ritual process participants enter the phase referred to as the “liminal phase” (Turner 1969:358-360). In a social or cultural transition, the liminal phase is defined by a state of being in-between and between statuses and structures because “liminality” challenges established social structures. The transition in a ritual process consists of three

stages: separation, liminality, and reintegration. In ritual processes, participants are separated from their established status in society. When entering the liminal phase their status can change, before eventually being reintegrated back into society (Turner 1969:359-360). I apply “liminality” to study processes of change in a historical approach, as certain characteristics of liminality reflect societal changes in the Marshall Islands.

During the forced relocation of islanders from their homes, social categories of the relocated communities were erased once they were moved to new islands where they did not obtain any land rights. They were betwixt and between due to the detonation of atomic bombs, which ultimately led to the loss of knowledge and change in social categories (Genz 2018, Hezel 2001:273-275). There is much to be discussed about the abrupt moments of social disorder in the Marshallese history because some people are still living in a liminal phase of being betwixt and between, ever since the relocation because they are not able to go back to their home islands due to the prolonged relocation and for some exile (Barker 2004:67, Genz 2018:94). Marshallese have been removed from their normal context and I argue that due to permanent relocation several Marshallese continue to live in a liminal context (Turner 1969).

When looking at the historical timeline of the Marshall Islands, Marshallese people have faced several challenges which have caused societal changes, and perhaps continues to shake up the structures in a process of establishing a “normality” (Turner 1969). Perhaps a state of flux has become internalized to become the normality in the Marshall Islands? Are the Marshallese stuck in a constant mode of flux? Gluckman and the Manchester school, claim that our whole human, social existence is in constant change and therefore in constant flux. And they (Gluckman and the Manchester school) were interested in the ways anthropology could contribute to the study of such flux (Kapferer 2005:87). Through this chapter, I have attempted to highlight the dynamic forces of change that are evident through the history as well as the ethnographic discussion of relationships between past and present and the Marshall Islanders’ own experiences and contextualization of how they view change. In the perspective developed by Gluckman on social life that change is a continual process of flux, I will apply this to the Marshallese context, and argue that certain events in the Marshallese history has been characterized by more intensified flux and states of betwixt and between (Kapferer 2005:87, Turner 1969:360-361). Therefore, I argue that a crisis in a Marshallese context is characterized by intensified change that abrupt with the “normality”, whatever normal means in the Marshallese context. And these changes involve challenges and crises that continue to bridge the past, the present, and the future of what it means to be a Marshall Islander.

The historical timeline throughout this chapter presents several events of challenges and crises in the Marshall Islands. The various meanings applied to these events are embedded through the experiences from the past and the memories of people who have lived through them in addition to the coming generations through collective memories. When studying the Marshallese history, traditional values and ways of life were challenged several times throughout missionary and colonial history and during the U.S. nuclear testing in the islands. Rudiak-Gould argues that through processes of modernity, Marshallese experience their relationship to the land as weakened, especially through nuclear testing that caused certain islands to become uninhabitable (Rudiak-Gould 2013:27). Dvorak on the other side argues that new layers of concrete add to the coral atolls. “Atollscapes”, is a term applied by Dvorak to describe the combined relationships which connect the Marshallese people to their ocean and islands, and how these relationships result in new meanings to live on an atoll island in present time (Dvorak 2018:27-30).

Both Rudiak-Gould and Dvorak focus on the past and the present. I am interested in how the processes of the past and the present-day Marshall Islands are connected to the Marshallese hope for the future. The climate change predictions for the Pacific Islands have been on the agenda for years now, and I argue that “climate change” is a known concept for Marshall Islanders. The meanings attached to this concept vary, especially in the clash between local and global discourses, which I will discuss moreover in chapter four, when I explore the Marshallese commitment to fight climate change. But first, I wish to take the pulse on Majuro, which is where I conducted fieldwork. Majuro is one of the low-lying atoll islands that make up the Marshall Islands, it is also one of the most urbanized areas and the capital of the RMI. Based on the historical accounts discussed in this chapter, how does the material change appear in the Marshall Island capital, Majuro? The climate crisis is today the biggest threat to the Marshall Islands, yet past crises and present crises escalate the forces of the climate crisis. –In what ways are people more resilient as well as more vulnerable to change based on past events?

Chapter 3

“We only have one road”

“I want to tell you about”: Majuro

As previously noted, at the beginning of my Pacific fieldwork, I was lucky to attend a couple of social events with the Marshallese students at the University of Hawai'i at Hilo (UHH), where I was provided with the necessary information and contacts to follow up when arriving in Majuro. However, I received mixed responses when I spoke with the students about my fieldwork in the Marshall Islands. Some students expressed excitement and gave me contact details of people who worked with environmental issues and climate change. On the other hand, others voiced skepticism towards my travel to Majuro. I am not exactly sure if their skepticism was related to my intention to conduct research on the islands or if it was simply a way of “preparing” me to lower my expectations from being disappointed with the place. Either way, the contradicting reactions stuck with me and created an interesting entrance to the field in Majuro.

The excited students had expressed to me how the Marshall Islands is a safe place with low crime rates and kind people who are very open and eager to help each other out, including strangers and visitors to the islands. They also told me about how beautiful it is “back home” and how they missed it and were excited for me to see it. The opposite of this was the reactions from the skeptical students who told me that Marshallese people are closed off and that it can take some time to get to know them. They said to me that even the Marshallese students who had traveled abroad or lived away from home have been called *ripelle*²⁸ when returning home to their islands. They said that children and elderly women especially stare at you as if you are “an alien”, if they view you as a *ripelle*. They also expressed how Majuro is a chaotic place and that along the road, in the ditch, there are several car wrecks from accidents resulting from people driving under the influence of drugs or alcohol. These descriptions of Majuro presented two opposite views, which established my awareness and interest in my immediate

²⁸ *Ripelle* is a local term that refers to an American, but it is also a term used to refer to tourists and foreigners in general.

surroundings when I arrived in Majuro. Indeed, I wished to research these contradicting descriptions of the place.

This chapter, therefore, focuses on the material landscape of Majuro and the urban space of the island. The first part of this chapter deals with the importance of belonging through the landscape. In the next part, I discuss how historical processes become apparent through the material landscape in Majuro and the Marshall Islands. Then, I will introduce empirical accounts based on my observations in Majuro and discuss them with reference to the historical perspectives presented in chapter two, as I further explore the meaning of imperial debris in the context of the Marshall Islands with an approach similar to that of Ann Stoler (2008). I do so to explore further the historical processes of challenges and crises in the Marshall Islands and how the Marshallese relate to the past, present, and future.

“Tell them”

In her famous poem “Tell them”, Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner (2017:64-67) describes life in the Marshall Islands. The poem presents several underlying symbolic meanings through descriptions of the relationships to land, ocean, and history. They are descriptions and stories she wishes for her family and friends in the States to pass on so that more people can learn about the Marshall Islands and the challenges the Marshallese have faced and are now facing due to climate change. The introduction of the poem tells the story of how the islands came to be and of their heritage as seafarers and navigators:

Tell them our islands were dropped

from a basket

carried by a giant

Tell them we are hollow hulls

Of canoes as fast as the wind

Slicing through the pacific sea

(Jetñil-Kijiner 2017:65)

Later the poem describes the island life in the present-day Marshall Islands. The phrase “Tell them we are” describes how all the following things make up life and parts of living in the Marshall Islands by humanizing the material surroundings.

Tell them we are dusty rubber slippers swiped

From concrete doorsteps

We are the ripped seams and the broken

Door handles of taxis

(Jetñil-Kijiner 2017:65)

As well as humanizing the landscape:

We are papaya golden sunsets bleeding

Into a glittering sea

We are skies uncluttered

Majestic in their sweeping landscape

We are the ocean

Terrifying and regal in its power

(Jetñil-Kijiner 2017:65)

The poem describes the closely embedded relationship in the Marshall Islands between the land, the ocean, and the people. In the stanza, the landscape encompasses materials that can be interpreted as both traditional and fundamental to the Marshallese identity: “Tell them we are hollow hulls of canoes as fast as the wind slicing through the pacific sea”. Or modern such as: “We are the ripped seams, and the broken door handles of taxis” (Jetñil-Kijiner 2017:65). These elements what make up the Marshallese holistic perspective of being connected to their surroundings and the landscape. It can also be interpreted as an example of how modernity is appropriated into the Marshallese worldview. Jetñil-Kijiner describes the totality of what it means to be a Marshall Islander in this poem. “Tell them” is an example of how historical experiences and collective memories have influenced the material landscape and the way Marshallese view their presence within the given material context. Jetñil-Kijiner ends her poem by referring to the climate crisis by stating that:

But most importantly you tell them

We don't want to leave

We've never wanted to leave

And that we

are nothing

without our islands

(Jetñil-Kijiner 2017:66-67)

There are several meanings attached to the words above. Firstly, “We don't want to leave” could respond to the various statements that the Marshall Islands will become uninhabitable due to climate change and sea-level rise. “We've never wanted to leave”, refers to the history and the forced relocation due to the U.S. nuclear weapons testing. “That we are nothing without our islands” (Jetñil-Kijiner 2017:67) describes the interconnectedness between the people and the landscape, and perhaps that even if new things such as Styrofoam cups or taxis arrive on the islands, these material things become one with the landscape. Regardless, without a landscape (no matter what it contains), there are no islands and, therefore, no people. In this case, the stanza also expresses an existential fear of losing the space where the meaning of existence is created and reinforced. The poem poetically describes the connections that make up the Marshallese existence through the experiences and interrelations between the people, the land, and the ocean.

Before the democratization and nationalization of the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) in 1982, the islands were divided by clanships and chiefs who lived spread throughout the atoll chains: *Ralik* and *Ratak*. Land rights and ownership were obtained through matrilineage (Dvorak 2018:54-55, Hezel 2001:5). Hezel has noted how Marshallese identified through the name of the land they derived from (Hezel 2001:35). The physical connection to the land traditionally considered the close engagement between land and people because the land was viewed as the basis for life on the islands (Hezel 2001:34, Petersen 2009:115). Dvorak notes how the English word “landowner” is misleading to the concept of landownership in the Marshall Islands because it is not people who own land but rather the land that owns people in the way they belong to the land in the traditional Marshallese concept (Dvorak 2018:57).

I argue that land continues to be significant in how islanders identify through their close connection to land and ancestors. The younger generation of Marshallese I met with identified as Marshall Islanders with references to their various genealogies and ancestors from different islands within the atoll chains. For example, one can identify as Mili, Bikini, or Enewetak, and more specific areas on islands. The close connection to land continues to be essential to how Marshallese identify today. Despite the loss of traditional knowledge and skills, and for some even the loss of land, I argue that people still identify and base their existence on the genealogy of place despite not being physically connected to the land anymore. The shared history of challenges and crises highlights the importance of identifying through the land as a Marshall Islander or, more specifically, genealogies such as a Bikini islander who lives anywhere but on one's home island. Bikini Atoll is uninhabitable due to radiation contamination (Hezel 1995:328-329). Therefore, it is necessary to ask if identifying through land has become more critical when people cannot live and stay connected to the land in the same way as they used to? I get back to this discussion in chapter four. But for now, I focus on how the Marshallese relation to land has been challenged throughout history. And how the visible landscape in which they live can tell us something about the state of the Marshall Islands through a material approach to landscape.

The Marshallese community is traditionally matrilineal, arranged through a hierarchy of land rights where women hold the primary position of power through land heritage (Hezel 2001:134). The political structure of the Marshall Islands has developed since the democratization of the islands. *Irooj* (chiefs) symbolize wealth and power. Still, Hezel argues that their type of wealth and power today is more traditionally and culturally valued due to the introduction of a democratic political system and the RMI's status as a republic. Today, the government, especially the president, also symbolize power (Hezel 2001:127,130-133). Chiefs in the Marshall Islands are regularly elected to the government. Still, the political system throughout Micronesia today is characterized by a "dual-chief system"²⁹ that Hezel describes as the division of political authority between chiefs and elected authorities (Hezel 2001:127).

"Operation homecoming" was based on the conflict between traditional landowners, chiefs, the national government, and the U.S. government in the negotiations over the lease agreements of Kwajalein Island (Dvorak 2018:214-216). "Operation homecoming" was also influenced by the relocated communities of Enewetak and Bikini to fight for nuclear justice (see Hezel 1995:325-

²⁹ More on the «dual chief system» see Hezel (2001:126-133)

331). Through economic influence on the islands and colonization and militarization, the traditional perspective of land has been challenged. Additionally, there has been an increase in individual landowners; in this sense, the Marshallese concept of land today is becoming more like the English concept of “landownership” (Dvorak 2018:57, Hezel 2001:36). Yet Hezel notes that landownership in the contemporary Marshall Islands is based on a mixture of traditional and the new concepts. Consequentially leaving certain people wealthy in owning greater extents of land, while others have sold off their land in exchange for money and are, in this regard, eventually left as “landless” (Hezel 2001:40).

The land was once entitled through kinship groups and overseen by the chiefs, no land was individually owned, and the land practice focused on sharing resources sustained from the land to the community. Families and their extended kin sustained their land, and the chiefs overlooked the land tenure. Chiefly power over land often served for the better of the community, as the foundational premise was to share what the land and ocean offered (Hezel 2001:38, Petersen 2009:111). Petersen has thus noted that the value of land would not have been recognized if it wasn't for people's commitment to sustain it, which is the significant relationship between people and land in the Marshall Islands. Still, it also points to how value is prescribed to the land and that the value of land wouldn't be as effective if people didn't engage with it (Petersen 2009:115). The opportunity to be self-sufficient from what the land and ocean offer has eventually been integral to the Marshallese identity throughout the centuries (Rudiak-Gould 2013:22-23).

“Life in the outer islands is more traditionally lived, and more easy-going, calmer, more like our ancestors used to live” people would tell me. Traditionally, families lived in a compound on the land they had rights to. The compound stretched from the lagoon side to the ocean side and further into the ocean as the ocean is a significant source of life in the Marshall Islands (Dvorak 2018:58-60). Such compounds are called *wato*. The *wato* was a kin-tied community where the members who participated in cultivating the land were considered part of the family (Petersen 2009:87). When Marshallese pass, they are buried on Marshallese land and generally on their own land. In Majuro, there are graves next to houses along the road. When Marshallese are buried, they become one with the land. Some of the gravesites in Majuro might be cemeteries, as described by Hezel (2001:91-92), established by the missionaries. Nevertheless, the gravesites I spotted were usually accessible to everyone, and people would often hang around the graves, I assume to feel connected to their ancestors.

The descriptions above reflect how the Marshallese place themselves in the world, as part of the sphere they live in, and in a constant interaction between people, land, and the ocean (Ingold 1993a). Through embodied experiences of living on the islands and along the ocean, the Marshallese view themselves as nothing without land or ocean as described in the poetry of Jetñil-Kijiner (2017:66-67). This discourse is relevant throughout this thesis, especially when I explore the international climate scene in chapter four. In other words, the traditional Marshallese value of land is still evident, no matter the historical challenges. As seen in Kathy's poetry and in the way youth still identify through their genealogies; the land is a significant part of Marshallese existence (Jetñil-Kijiner 2017:66-67).

The traditional concept of *wato* is no longer practiced in Majuro. People don't live in family compounds stretching from the ocean side to the lagoon side anymore because Majuro is an urban city, and people have adopted a more modern household and lifestyle, living in apartment buildings for example. Nevertheless, Majuro is still divided between the ocean side and lagoon side today by a road. In addition, the change in the climate is now one of the main challenges to everyday life in Majuro. Climatic change is impossible to avoid, and it affects the urban island of Majuro in several ways. For example, the climate determines when it is safe to collect shells along the seashore reef, when it is best to go fishing, and even the access to fish in the sea. The climate also affects the mobility of the urban island. King tides affect the traffic along the road and flood parts of it. It also affects the access to water during periods of drought. The climate also affects people's health. Depending on which side of the road one lives, climate change is apparent through sea-level rise and saltwater erosion. Due to increased climate change, people's daily routines will become more affected. Eventually, it challenges the entire Marshallese existence, as discussed above. I will now draw upon the historical record from the last chapter and approach the material meanings of the landscape through "Tell them" (2017) and Jetñil-Kijiner's descriptions of the close relationship between land and people as I explore how historical events of challenges and crises is expressed in the landscape of the Marshall Islands? And what visible processes of change are materialized in the landscape? I will explore this through an approach to material debris in the following parts of this chapter.

Material debris

Life in Majuro is characterized by the climate and the ocean, which are part of the island environment. The increased changes in the climate also impact more severe damages and challenges in the aftermath of more unpredictable extreme weather and king tides. The increasing sea-level rise also affects the island's appearance and people's social lives. The preparedness for such extreme weather is visible in the large green water containers that are spread across gardens and at the back of building complexes. The political system and people's health are also challenged by the increased climate change, as seen in the rapid spread of dengue fever in the islands and the global pandemic. The characteristics of the Marshall Islands are visible in the landscape, and I argue that analyzing the landscape can give an insight into not only the island's social life but also how history is materialized through the landscape. I am, therefore, interested in looking at the material consequences on the island landscape and the historical continuity through material debris in the Marshall Islands.

Stoler argues that "imperial debris" is the material remains of imperial regimes and consequentially part of ongoing imperial processes of "ruination" which is embedded within the context of people's social life (Stoler 2008:194-196). Instead of focusing on an empire, which Stoler argues is a fixed form of an event or a period in history that ends, the term "imperial formations" suggests ongoing processes of becoming. Ruins represent different perceptions of history with a connection to the future in the way ruins shape the presence (Stoler 2008:194,211-212). Ruination is then the process of an imperial presence that becomes an integrated part of material things, sensibility, or structures Stoler argues (Stoler 2008:194-195). I say that there are processes of ruination in the material landscape of the Marshall Islands. And I explore ruination processes in Majuro because I am interested in studying how historical processes have impacted and keep impacting the landscape and people's perceptions of their connections to the landscape in narratives about the history of times characterized by challenges and crises. As I explore the processes of ruination, the dual threats of nuclear times and climate change in the Marshall Islands are substantiated and amplified. How do material ruins represent challenges and crises in the Marshall Islands? And how are processes of imperial debris present through such challenges and crises that have manifested in the Marshallese landscape?

Life along the road

In the introduction to this thesis, I discussed my method for settling into the field. When I arrived in Majuro, I was prepared for the unknown, to the extent one can be ready for the unknown. I argued in chapter one that by being somewhere for the first time, unique insights into the context can be revealed through a “surprise of ethnography” (Schwender 1997), and how it is a significant part of the discovery process when settling into the field. Majuro welcomed me with hot and humid weather, and I was worried I would never feel a breeze or stop sweating as my Norwegian body was not exactly used to the Marshallese climate. Living in Majuro, I would soon come to learn that changes in the weather are dynamic and that weather sometimes switches several times throughout the day, from a cooling afternoon breeze to heavy rainfall in the night and burning hot midday sunshine. I acclimatized quickly as I began exploring the island.

“What is happening in Majuro?” I remember asking myself on one of the first days in Majuro. At times I felt lost and confused, not knowing what people were doing, where they stayed, and what they spent their days doing. Emerging into the daily life of people you do not already know in an unfamiliar place takes time. I had little time. Still, I argue that the confusion over my existence in Majuro and the escalating situation of the “lockdown” due to Covid-19 have offered interesting remarks about the social life in Majuro³⁰. To make myself less confused, I started mapping out my surroundings. As a result, I developed a material description of Majuro, which I will discuss in terms of debris and processes of ruination, with reference to Stoler (2008) as discussed above.

Over 70% of the Marshallese population live in the two urban centers of the RMI, which are Ebeye on Kwajalein Atoll and Majuro on Majuro Atoll, the latter with an estimated population of about 27.797 people in 2021 (City Population 2021, Rudiak-Gould 2013:20). Majuro is the RMI capital and the main center for the national governments, politics, education, and medical institutions. The elevation of the atoll is just three meters above seawater. Majuro is a unique urban space due to its geographic location and the densely populated square meters of land area which is surrounded by the ocean on both sides of the narrow land. One road divides the island, and I have described this road to be the very pulse of social life in Majuro.

³⁰ See page 13-16.

The main road in Majuro is the longest paved road in all of Micronesia and it stretches from the eastern tip of the island through the town of Rita to the west tip town called Laura. People live along this road on both sides, from the lagoon side to the island's ocean side. The road stretches through the middle of the island like a main artery, pulsating the social life in Majuro. The atoll of Majuro is divided into several islands with a lagoon in the middle. The Island of Majuro is the most extended connected island in the Majuro Atoll. It has even been elongated by both landfills and a bridge, connecting the two parts of the island as "one". Opposite the lagoon view in Majuro, the smaller islands of the atoll chain become visible when the weather is good and the sky is clear. On gloomy days, the view of the islands disappears, and the lagoon changes from being calm and turquoise with a relaxing ocean sound to acting and looking as if the wide-open ocean has pushed through into the lagoon. Whitewash waves crashing onshore, in a sound of an angry sea. It is impossible to be somewhere, anywhere in Majuro, and not feel the presence of the ocean. It is constantly there.

The downtowns: Ulliga and Delap have the highest density of people living near each other. The bank and the post office are located downtown, along with the government building and the ministries' offices. In addition, the College of the Marshall Islands (CMI), and several high schools and elementary schools are situated in downtown Majuro. Downtown is also where the two hotels are located and where most tourists, guests, international businesspeople, and politicians usually stay. The hotels are also used to host events and they offer a lagoon view. Outside one of the hotels is a small square with an ATM, a coffee shop, and some tables. Men often gather around one of the tables to play chess during midday, under the roof to get cover from the hot sun. The town park is located along the road on the lagoon side, next to the largest supermarket in Majuro. The Park is a place for public celebrations and events such as Majuro day, Nuclear Victims Remembrance Day, International Women's Day, and Manit day. On afternoons people play basketball or volleyball in the park. All these institutions and public spaces are indicators of an urban city, according to Mumford's characteristics of the city, in the way that they are arranged as "an aesthetic symbol of collective unity" (Mumford 1937:94). The city is a theatre of social action, according to Mumford (1937:94), and I argue that the road is the main stage for social life in Majuro.



Figure 6 «Majuro from above» The picture shows parts of Majuro and the contours of the one road in the middle of the narrow Majuro Island. It also shows how the lagoon is situated in the middle of the atoll, on the left and the ocean on the right side of the atoll. Photo by author

Touring Majuro

On a Sunday afternoon, I was lucky to be given a tour of the downtown area in Majuro by one of my friends. I was introduced to essential stores, places to refill clean drinking water, ATM locations, and the National Telecommunications Company (NTA), where it is possible to update the phone data or to buy a MiFi³¹. I also learned where the different restaurants and cafes in the area were located. The tour taught me how I could cover all essential needs to “survive” on the island. In addition to this, walking around downtown sparked conversations about the different buildings and paths we took. For example, we often had to cross the road back and forth according to where it was “safe” to walk without getting attacked by dogs. There almost seems to be more dogs than people in Majuro, which might stem from the fact that many families own several dogs or that Majuro is an attractive place for stray dogs. It isn’t to differentiate between the two because there are dogs everywhere along the road, and certain dogs are very protective of the area they belong to. Since it was a Sunday afternoon, there was limited traffic on the road, which made it easy to cross because usually there is a constant queue of cars going down or up the Lagoon Road. I am convinced that there are more cars than people in Majuro.

Walking up to the most conspicuous building in Majuro, I asked my friend to tell me the story behind the building because it stood out from the rest of the Majuro architecture. The facade is covered by windows and lights up the building when reflecting the sun, glinting in a mix of bright orange, pink, red, and yellow, reflecting the beautiful sunsets just before the darkness sets over the island. The building had caught my eye on my first taxi trip up, and down the island. The building was empty, and it had a fence covering the entrance to keep people from entering. It appeared to be under construction, and since it was also one of the most “modern” buildings I had seen since arriving in Majuro, I made this conclusion myself. The fence and “do not enter” signs had a story: The building used to be the parliament building, and at the time of construction work, the worker’s contracts had ended, and the government did not prolong their contracts. Therefore, it is not complete³².

When we walked to the back of the building, I understood why they (whoever put up the signs) did not want people to trespass and enter the building. The backside of the building was

³¹ MiFi is a portable Wi-Fi connection.

³² I am not sure if this story represents the real story about the building because after talking to several people, the stories attached to the building vary.

unfinished, with just a foundation, the skeleton of a construction. My friend jokingly pointed out that the building symbolized the Marshall Islands, “It looks like a paradise from the outside, but the backside shows the reality.” This way of explaining the Marshall Islands stuck with me. And the diverse stories about the building as well. The building itself can be considered a ruin because it is an example of how the bureaucratic expectation of instituting a government or parliament building as a sovereign state does not necessarily reflect the local needs. It is an ongoing process of the “given” independence from the United States and an example of a young sovereign state’s common bureaucratic notions or low budgets. Most budgets come from monetary benefits from outside actors, especially from the COFA, which is due to expire in 2023. The COFA provides one-third of the RMI’s annual budget (Government Accountability Office 2022).

Additionally, the RMI receives financial aid equivalent to 61% (in 2010) of Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Pacific Islands also depend on financial assistance to adapt to climate change (Barnett & Campbell 2010:8-10). “Economic independence has not followed political independence” Barnett and Campbell (2010:37) state about Pacific Islands countries economic dependency. I also analyze such a dependency on outside actors concerning the imported materials or even workers to finish the construction project of the government building in Majuro, which in return costs money and time to expect shipments. The statement “It looks like a paradise from the outside, but the backside shows the reality” reflects the sensibility of material ruins. I will argue that the meaning of this statement can be connected to other material debris in the Marshall Islands as well (Stoler 2008:194).

Mount Trashmore

Concerning the Marshall Islands’ dependence on foreign aid to the local GDP, the RMI is dependent on imported goods, and container ships are filled with foodstuffs, cars, electronics, and various goods from the U.S., China, Australia, and Japan. Driving along the road, empty containers and wrecked cars occupy the landscape, which is another example of an imperial ruination process, I argue. New materials arrive in the islands from overseas and eventually pollute the atoll while continuing to create a demand. At the same time, the imperial presence in the islands is reinforced through materiality (Stoler 2008:192-194). I argue, that this demands is part of an ongoing process of capitalism, another factor of the colonial times on the islands. An example of a consequence of such a demand process is “Mount Trashmore”.

The first time I passed by the dump, I was amazed by the enormous loads of trash and how it seemed to be the highest point on the island. I used this observation, and to be honest, shocked, to start conversations. While driving, I tried to comment on the dump as we passed by it. Through these conversations during taxi drives, I learned that it had different names, such as “Mount Trashmore³³” and “Trash Mountain”. I applied what I knew about the dump in conversations and slowly started to learn more about it. Around a year ago, there had been a fire at the dump. I was told that the fire had spread and that it took time to get the situation under control. The fire had spread and caused an evacuation of several households, but the worst thing was the pollution which remained in the air for several days. The toxic waste polluted the air, and this was something people were concerned about, especially the people living in the towns nearby.

I found it a bit strange how people did not speak that much of the dump unless I said something about it; perhaps it is not something that crosses their minds too often as they are used to its constant presence. Nevertheless, the fire reminded people of how toxic the dump was. I also became more aware of the trash along with one of the lagoon-side beaches. The beach was cleaned by personnel almost every day. I also talked to one of the climate clubs about the polluted beach. One time they had organized a beach cleanup where they had collected trash such as beer cans, plastic bottles, and even a fridge. People only swam in the lagoon after the beach was cleaned. I was often reminded lagoon’s water pollution, and I very seldom saw people swim in the lagoon anywhere else along the island.

The connection between the trash on the beach (located on the lagoon side) and Mount Trashmore (located on the ocean side) exemplifies the cycle of how every imported material in the islands is part of the more extensive imperial ruination process discussed above. Firstly, almost everything sold in the stores is packaged. Second, there are not a lot of trash cans along the road. Therefore, most trash from consumption ends up in the ditch before getting washed out to the lagoon or the ocean. The trash cans at recycling points on the island ultimately only serve as a symbol of “clean” and “environmentally friendly” because the content often follows another cycle than what recycling applies in theoretical terms. Take the lagoon side beach, for example; it is cleaned almost daily. Several people come to pick up the trash along the beachside and collect it in bags or recycling bins, later brought to the dump. The dump is already overfilled

³³ A wordplay and sarcastic remark about Mount Rushmore, the granite carved sculpture of the six American grandfathers situated in South Dakota, USA (Wikipedia.org, “Mount Rushmore”).

with trash and even elevating the island due to its large mound of waste. The additional collection of garbage adds more layers to Mount Trashmore. Due to the dump's location on the ocean side, the tides tend to drag trash from the mound back out into the ocean again. Because of the current, most of this trash will end up flowing back into the lagoon right back onto the beach. The rest of the trash travels to other islands in the Pacific, which pollutes the ocean causing climate change, threatening the life and well-being of the ocean and everyone who depends upon it.

Mount Trashmore is a ruin of the imperial presence in Majuro and is damaging and threatening the islands' landscape and climate. In contrast, it can also be understood as an example of the constant adding of layers, exemplified by Dvorak's concepts of coral and concrete. In the case of Mount Trashmore, the trash is added as another layer to the island and becomes a part of the Majuro landscape, just like coral polyps in the geological creation of atolls (Dvorak 2018:21-23). Despite this, the trash can be analyzed to be more of a concrete character as it represents new layers that are added to the Marshallese landscape and historical process. Mount Trashmore literally elevates the land. Waste is also used to build sea walls to protect the island from rising sea levels. It is also an example of how local climate change topics and initiatives such as recycling are constituted locally and globally, which I return to later. This constant cycle of pollution takes me to my following example of ruination in the Marshall Islands: the atomic waste dome.



Figure 7 "A look into the Majuro Dumpsite". Photo by author.

Runit Dome

As I have argued before, the Marshall Islands' geographic position in the Pacific Ocean has played a significant part to why foreign interests developed in the islands, to begin with³⁴. After serving as the arena for the Pacific war between Japan and United States, the U.S. soon began utilizing its new territory. The 67 atomic bombs that were detonated in the lagoons and islands of the Marshall Islands from 1940 to the 1950s, and because of the Islands' "remoteness"³⁵, served the U.S. military an opportunity to test nuclear weapons without anyone finding out (Barker 2004: 19-20, Genz 2018:86-87). In addition to the possible effects of nuclear weapons testing, which would only affect "90,000 people" (Jetnil-Kijiner 2017:20). I have already discussed some of the horrific damages and consequences of these tests, yet this destruction of islands could not just be swept under a metal dome and forgotten. Stoler (2008:203) mentions Bikini Atoll as an example of a place where the vulnerabilities of imperial ruins will last longer than the political structures that created them and declared the atoll uninhabitable. In other words, the long-lasting effects are part of the ruination of a continuous process that is still harmful.

The concrete dome on the island of Runit in Enewetak Atoll is where nuclear waste was collected in the 1970s, a couple of years after the U.S. military had conducted its last nuclear test. It is now argued that the U.S. cleaned the contaminated soil of the affected islands, collected it, and sealed it under a concrete dome on one of the uninhabitable islands. However, instead of covering the dangerous waste, the dome has become a symbol of nuclear history in the Marshall Islands. Today the Runit Dome is threatened by rising sea levels, just like the rest of the islands in the RMI. There are concerns that the rising sea can create cracks in the dome and eventually leak atomic waste into the Pacific Ocean, spreading far beyond the Marshall Islands (Gerrard 2015:92-93). This results in the anticipated ruination of the islands and an even greater concern: the ocean.

Covered by a dome, the waste is no longer visible - what is out of sight is out of mind. Yet this mentality does not reflect the Marshallese views of the dome. Both the dump in Majuro and the Runit Dome tells stories about the history and the local problems in the Islands that cannot be hidden, even if it is covered with cement or flows into the ocean. It is a constant reminder of

³⁴ See discussion on page 28-33.

³⁵ A discourse that is very much discussed, and I elaborate on such discourses in chapter four. Also, see Hau'ofa (1993).

history and the circumstances and threats for future generations. Material continuity and collected memories from past experiences with the crisis are what the Runit Dome then eventually symbolizes, what has become a process of ruination in the Marshallese landscape (Stoler 2008).

I wish to adapt this example of ruination and historical continuity to Dvorak's argument: "In the deep-time schemes of things, even concrete breaks down" (Dvorak 2018:27). When arguing that the effects of sea-level rise can eventually cause cracking of the concrete dome on Runit Island, it is a materialized ruination process of the U.S. imperial times in the Marshall Islands. The leaking of nuclear waste into the ocean will extend this ruination process. Therefore, in line with Dvorak's metaphor of concrete, I argue that the statement about how even concrete can break down, reflects the continuous processes of ruination. And in this sense, the concrete describes the new layers of history in the islands and the material consequences of the United States' presence in the Marshall Islands when referring to the actual, physical concrete dome on Runit Island (Dvorak 2018:25-27). I argue that the historical processes apparent through the landscape of Majuro continue in the process of the reconfiguration of imperial debris (Stoler 2008:211-212). The history is materialized within the Marshallese landscape, and the ruination of nuclear waste inside Runit Dome might equal the continuing process of climate change and sea-level rise. This is the intersection between nuclear times and climate change. The cracking of Runit Dome due to sea-level rise can cause an intensified ruination of the Pacific Ocean when radiation spreads across the sea.

Runit Dome is also the ultimate threat that connects the nuclear era and the time of climate change. If not already declared a crisis, it could seem as if there is an ongoing nuclear crisis. When looking at the consequences of destruction in the Marshall Islands in the material landscape the nuclear era is still present today. The U.S. Congress has also begun to regard the issue of the Runit Dome. In the 117th Congress on October 21st, 2021, Marshallese witnesses were invited to a hearing about the Runit Dome and the nuclear legacy the U.S. government holds in the Marshalls (Congress 2021). Perhaps the U.S. is beginning to consider the extreme consequences their military actions caused the Marshallese in their nuclear weapons testing program, but hopefully also to contribute to finding solutions for the future damages caused by Runit Dome. The dome won't cover up or hide the nuclear waste as intended by the U.S. once the sea rises and cracks the dome.

Health vulnerability

While planning my fieldwork up to departing from Honolulu, I had to get vaccinated, have health checks, and confirm specific health requirements initiated by the RMI government. The RMI government wishes for travelers to arrive healthy to the islands to protect the islands from any new diseases and to avoid travelers taking up the capacity of an already low-capacity health system. Before my departure to Majuro, I was informed of the ongoing dengue outbreak, especially in the capital of Majuro and the other densely populated island of Ebeye. I learned that the spread of dengue to smaller, outer atolls was a significant threat to the Marshallese living there because they had limited opportunity to receive necessary health care since they had no hospitals in the outer islands. Therefore, the government-initiated programs of medical forces sent to the outer islands to document the spread and care, and initiated programs to limit the spread in more densely populated areas such as Majuro and Ebeye.

Human health is the main argument of the Marshallese resistance against nuclear weapons due to the consequences and impacts on the Marshall Islands. The Marshallese work for compensation on behalf of the victims exposed to radiation is based on the health complications, such as long-term illnesses, birth defects, and death. The repercussions of the nuclear age are still affecting the Marshallese people in bodily ways today (Yamada 2004). In addition, the Marshall Islands have been fighting a dengue fever epidemic since July of 2019. Such epidemics, along with the global spreading of the Covid-19 pandemic, become more severe in the ongoing battle against diseases in the Marshall Islands. In addition, underlying disease and the bodily effects from radiation can cause a more severe course of the disease when exposed to such viruses.

Along the road in Majuro, at the general store, in schools, and the government buildings, there were signs about where to get clean drinking water, facts on diabetes and tuberculosis, how to maintain hygiene, etc. These signs and posters confirm the population's struggles with diseases and how the government wants to limit health epidemics and the increased chance of syndemics. Ahlgren, Wong, and Yamada (2014:74) write that syndemics are the spreading of several epidemics simultaneously. This is similar to the ongoing crises and challenges in the Marshall Islands. Due to the dependence on aid from other countries, especially the U.S., Australia, New Zealand, and Japan, the RMI is not well equipped to deal with and treat occurring syndemics without such subsidies to strengthen the local health care system (Ahlgren, Wong & Yamada 2014:74-75).

The RMI government wishes travelers to arrive in healthy conditions to the islands to protect the RMI from new diseases and decrease the capacity of an already limited health system. On February 7th, the RMI government issued a national health crisis due to the uncertainty about Covid-19, and its increased spreading globally³⁶. In the Marshall Islands Journal on Friday, March 6th, I read how Health Secretary Jack Niedenthal expressed his worry about the uncertainty of the virus (Covid-19) and that the Marshallese health system was not ready to deal with the possible spreading of Covid-19, but that the government would begin preparations for the arrival of the virus in the RMI (Johnson 2020:13).

During my weeks in Majuro, I could follow the news and updates surrounding the dengue outbreak and the Marshallese fear of Covid-19 in the local newspaper. The health secretary announced the suspicion of the importation of Covid-19 to the islands week after week, explaining how the medical system would collapse if a case of Covid infection occurred in the islands. Covid-19 can affect people with underlying illnesses to develop a more serious disease course. Due to the Marshall Islanders' struggle with the disease, I argue that this is an embodied ruination, as most diseases are traced back to effects of radiation, such as various types of cancer and the general health issue of obesity and diabetes (Ahlgren, Wong & Yamada 2014, Yamada 2004). Such bodily effects as a disease from nuclear testing and colonialism are comparative to Stoler's example of Agent Orange in Vietnam, where ecologies and bodies were affected by American chemical warfare. Such ruination Stoler argues remains in people's bodies (Stoler 2008: 203,206-207). The same goes for the health effects the nuclear weapons testing in the Marshall Islands, which has prolonged the ruination process of becoming a part of people's bodies. The symptoms and the vulnerability to other diseases continue the production of such embodied ruination from imperial times in the islands (Stoler 2008:206-207).

³⁶ See Appendix B

Ambiguous Landscape

In this chapter, I have discussed the importance of land and the Marshallese way of belonging to the landscape. I then discussed the material debris of historical processes of ruination in the material landscape. The close relationships between the Marshallese people and land are essential to understanding ruins' significance in the material landscape of Majuro and the Marshalls. The perspective of material remnants of imperial debris shows how the historical processes have materialized in the Marshallese landscape through an embodiment of such processes. It shows how these processes don't end and remain in the past, such as empires, but they are instead processes of decaying, which ultimately continue to impact the people's lives long after a specific event or time of history (Stoler 2008:193-194). The material landscape is multilayered like the historical processes and constantly present within the Marshallese context (Dvorak 2018:18-32). The horrific history combined with the new layers of impacts and challenges is paradoxical. From being witnesses to the bombings of their home islands leaving them uninhabitable to the forced relocation resulting in the loss of land rights and disruption with the deep connections to the landscape, along with an escalation of imported goods, cars, and waste and the increasing sea levels intensifies the climate crisis.

The Marshallese landscape is ambiguous. It is temporal because it can disappear if specific processes escalate, such as climate change. Still, the Marshallese landscape is also continuous in how people dwell within it and apply new meanings and understandings to their contexts. It encompasses both traditional and modern, both coral and concrete. The Marshallese landscape is a prerequisite and a consequence of the atolls' social life; through this interrelation, historical processes develop. The Marshallese are closely related to the landscape through their embodied experiences of dwelling, and the historical process of the ruination of the landscape wherein they dwell (Ingold 1993b). The material landscape tells stories about changes in the Marshall Islands and how these processes have affected their notion of existence. In the previous chapter and here, I have highlighted how the Marshall Islands is part of a more extensive global process, especially in the time of climate change as it affects the impacts of the future. In the next chapter, I will therefore explore the international climate scene to investigate how Marshallese experience and act as participants in such extensive global processes. I will also bring up the discussion of belonging and what it means to the Marshallese identity.

Chapter 4

“We are nothing without our Islands”

Climate, Justice, and Ocean

Throughout the previous chapters, I have explored the historical and material consequences of challenges and crises in the Marshall Islands. I have also explored the Marshallese relationship to land and ocean, and how it has been challenged throughout history. The physical interrelation between people and land were threatened during the time of the nuclear weapons testing, the forced relocation of communities, illnesses and health implications, and the climate crisis, which today threatens the land by rising sea levels. The experiences of these challenges and crises have also impacted the narratives and views of Marshallese about their own history and relationship to the land - as seen in the tradition vs. modernity discussion³⁷, where people view their past traditional lifestyles living in close relation to land as fundamental to their entire existence, and in opposition to modernity which challenges such a lifeway, and even the statement such as: “we have no culture anymore” (Rudiak-Gould 2013). In addition, the new layers of concrete add to the deep histories of coral as explored through Dvorak (2018), and to the material landscape of Majuro as explored in the previous chapter. In other words, the Marshallese history is complex, involving several experiences and narratives about challenges and crises. Yet, it becomes clear that the challenges and crises in the Marshall Islands tend to overlap and connect in the timeline of historical events and consequences. People speak about the present concerned with the past and fearful imaginings of the future. There are contradicting perspectives between the various narratives and existential views when making these connections.

Therefore, in this chapter, I will explore the various discourses surrounding the narratives in the climate debate. The loss of land has characterized much of the fight for nuclear justice, and it is also relevant in the fight against climate change. Because land is an integrated part of the Marshallese existence, it becomes increasingly threatened by climate change and sea-level rise. “We are nothing, without our islands” is a popular discourse I have observed in the Marshallese climate activism and Kathy’s poetry (2017). It is also a Pacific narrative about the threats of

³⁷ See page 40-46

climate change (Steiner 2015:155-156,170-171). Although in the Marshall Islands, people have already experienced being relocated from their land due to nuclear weapons testing, along with the increased flow of migration to the U.S. due to the Compact of Free Association, Marshallese can live and work freely in the USA without obtaining a visa (Barker 2004:30, Genz 2018:193). In this chapter, I explore the Marshallese self-reflexivity and how they view their placement in the world through a “chaos” of history, challenges, and crises (Ortner 2005:34).

Through a constant awareness of the history, in a time of climate change, the Marshallese do not solely adopt a role as victims or vulnerable. Still, I argue that instead, they are fighters and even warriors (Steiner 2015:169). There are several contradicting views in Marshallese narratives about challenges and crises, this chapter will focus on disentangling some of these views by focusing on discourses and storytelling. The fact that the narratives present contradicting views in the first place speaks only to the complexity of the experiences with challenges and crises in the Marshall Islands. Based on past experiences with challenges and the escalation of crises such as climate change and the Covid-19 pandemic, the Marshallese determination to protect their Island home is confirmed through activism. This chapter, therefore, explores the narratives of victims and warriors, blame, global engagement, and the next generation as I focus on the unfolding of climate activism in the Marshall Islands.

I will start by focusing on the ocean because it is through the ocean changes were brought to the islands. In a Marshallese view, the ocean is an extension of the land. It has been an essential part of the Marshallese identity as ocean people (such as canoe builders and navigators) (Genz 2018:20). The ocean also connects the Pacific Islands and the rest of the world. The ocean has brought navigational skills, canoes, explorers, missionaries, colonizers, nuclear weapons, and climate change to the Marshall Islands. In this view, the ocean brought challenges and crises to the islands. Once, the ocean was the primary source of life in the Marshall Islands. In times of climate change, the ocean has become the biggest threat to life in the Marshall Islands. In the next section, I will therefore explore a question posed by Edvard Hviding (2003:249) on: “whether living by the sea on an oceanic island promotes a certain view of the world”

The Oceanic Approach

It is necessary to start this chapter by introducing Epli Hau’ofa’s famous argument on the widespread academic and political belittlement discourse about the Pacific. His analysis is foundational to some of the arguments I will be making in this chapter, where I connect the

discourses of challenges and crises in the Marshall Islands to the more extensive global debate on climate change. The narratives of Marshallese specifically and Pacific islanders, in general, are significant to the discussion on climate change because they are some of the first people to experience extensive challenges due to climate change. At the same time, they are dependent on a global commitment to lower the emissions of greenhouse gases to decrease the consequences of climate change (Borrevik 2019:210,214-216). On the international climate change scene, experiences of living on an oceanic island such as the Marshall Islands does promote a certain view of the world.

Hau'ofa's famous words in "Our Sea of Islands" (1993) describe the experience of the belittlement of several Pacific Island communities by others, especially in academics and politics. Hau'ofa argues that such a discourse of belittlement of the Pacific Islands as small, remote, and isolated impacts islanders' view of themselves in the way that it reinforces a feeling of hopelessness and dependency on others, which is part of the reproduction of colonial discourse in the Pacific (Hau'ofa 1993:1-6). Eventually, Hau'ofa's main concern is that this deterministic perspective will eventually become internalized by Pacific Islanders and lead to injustice by outside parties, especially regarding economic interests (Hau'ofa 1993:6-7). In the context of the Marshall Islands, the security and military interests of the United States could be an example of this as well. Hau'ofa even points to the physical damages to the Marshall Islands and the Marshallese people due to the U. S's nuclear weapons testing (Hau'ofa 1993:6).

Based on Hau'ofa's words about how harmful these discourses are to the Pacific and his concern about the reproduction of such discourses, he introduces a new perspective of the Pacific Islands (and even wishes to focus on Oceania instead). He argues that Pacific Islands are a product of colonial boundaries that oversees the totality of the connections within the ocean (Hau'ofa 1993:7-9). The perspective Hau'ofa introduces focuses on the shared ancient history of connectedness across the Pacific Ocean which promotes a shared Pacific Islander identity as people of the ocean (Hau'ofa 1993:7). He argues that even though Pacific Islands have less landmass than other places, that size is relative. Through a focus on ancient stories and myths throughout the Pacific region, islanders have projected a worldview that is nothing but that of smallness. Hau'ofa argues that Pacific Islanders do not conceive only the surface of their islands, but they include the entire ocean that surrounds their islands, in which they have explored and navigated (Hau'ofa 1993:6-7).

In the Marshall Islands, navigation and sailing canoes throughout the Pacific Ocean and the surrounding atolls were important to the settlement of the islands, upholding social ties and

sustaining resources (Genz 2018:34-35, Rudiak-Gould 2013:16-17). In addition, as explored by Genz (2018), the role of a navigator in the Marshall Islands was highly ranked, and a navigator's skills were based on his connection with the ocean and reading the stars (Genz 2018:31-32,66-67). In other words, people in the Marshall Islands have a strong connection to their surrounding sea. This connection and the importance of the ocean in Pacific communities is what Hau'ofa talks about when he states that the Pacific people's world;" Their world was anything but tiny" (Hau'ofa 1993:7).

The Marshall Islands' location in the Pacific Ocean has been significant throughout history. During the events of the American military's nuclear weapons testing in the Marshall Islands, the Americans exploited the islands' "isolation" from the rest of the world (Genz 2018:86). At the same time, with the development of the military base on Kwajalein, both the Japanese and the Americans exploited the islands' "strategic" location as a connection between Asia and America (Dvorak 2018:2-3,6-7). Although, the consequences of the U.S. nuclear testing program continue to be of concern in terms of climate change and sea-level rise, as discussed in the previous chapter (Gerrard 2015:92-93).

The Marshall Islands is an example of how complex narratives about challenges and crises connect through a historical and global perspective. The ocean connects the islands to the rest of the world, and it connects the world to the islands. Climate change is a global issue already affecting the Marshall Islands, but it is not only a threat to the Marshall Islands. It is a threat to the entire world. Studying such complex narratives in the context of the Marshall Islands can give an insight into more extensive global issues regarding challenges and crises.

From victims to warriors

I will now focus on the international climate change scene because it is a space where the Marshallese both discuss and perform. They do that through activism, their relationship with challenges and crises of the past, the present, and the future. The Marshallese are continuing to fight for nuclear justice and against climate change. However, due to the post-nuclear time concerning the Marshallese pleas for compensation and nuclear justice, impacts and discourses that have evolved since the nuclear period have mostly concerned the Marshallese experiences of injustices (Hezel 2000). What room for action, then, do these discourses leave to the global context of the climate change scene?

I argue that it is necessary to acknowledge the Marshallese reflexivity in the chaos of history and future imaginings. Then, inspired by Ortner's theory of subjectivity (2005), I consider the Marshallese as "knowing subjects" who have individual desires about what kind of reality they view in the future and how they, through their agency, perform these desires through art, stories, and activism. The performance of agency considers their reflexivity and awareness based on their personal histories and the circumstances which have changed their realities in various ways (Navigation, colonialism, militarization, globalization, and climate change) (see Ortner 2005:34).

I also suggest that the Marshallese embody a "complex subjectivity," which is what agency presupposes, according to Ortner (Ortner 2005:33-34). Due to the internalized awareness of one's surroundings, and the reactions and actions upon the histories through which certain realities have been characterized. In terms by an outside force over an extended time, the Marshallese experiences seem to be ignored. Dictating the environment of social life and the later established discourses based on historical events have resulted in a continuous process of producing a specific Marshallese context, which has failed to include the participants of history, the Marshallese themselves (Ortner 2005:33-35, 45). In the process of "coming to terms with" (Rudiak-Gould 2013:21), and untangling their complex history, the Marshallese have faced multiple challenges throughout history hence some scholars worry that the Marshallese will internalize a discourse of victimization based on their history, and in the future when faced with new challenges and crises such as climate change and Covid-19.

In some instances, what makes the Marshallese apply a discourse of victimization? According to Foucault (1976), power is produced through what he views as a "triangle of power", constructed through a triangle with constant integration of the three: power, right, and knowledge. The continuous dynamics between the three eventually create and reinforce power. Foucault is concerned with how the discourses of truth are produced and how rules of right and various types of power are inclined to produce such discourses of truth (Foucault 1976:229). Foucault states that in every society: people become subject to the truths produced through the power and that despite this, power cannot be exercised without the production of truths (Foucault 1976:229-230). Truth is institutionalized, according to Foucault through the demanded production of truths and power in a society. The other side to this is how truth subjects people because the truth produces power in the first place, along with the discourses which extend upon power effects. Truth, rules, and power are the elements behind the dynamics of discourse and affect how people relate their perceptions of truths in society (Foucault

1976:229-234). Based on Foucault's argument that such discourses are institutionalized, I ask: How are discourses about climate change institutionalized through discussions and experiences with climate change?

I wish to explore how the Marshallese history has become institutionalized through the production of truths and knowledge about events that have taken place. In this production, narratives are prescribed with truth and become reinforced through power and rules (Foucault 1976:229-230). In chapter two, I gave a historical account of the Marshall Islands and some of the significant challenges I mentioned related to nuclear weapons testing and climate change. The Marshall Islands was part of another nation's sovereign power through colonialism and militarization for an extended time. Hence the history of events in the islands was defined as truths of the reigning power. Foucault suggests that to study power, we should try to locate the power where it is most extreme in its exercise (Foucault 1976:232). I argue that by focusing on the colonialization and militarization in the Marshall Islands it is possible to study the various discourses within the given context of the islands. When exploring the history of events and the ruination process of debris, the power relations between the Marshallese, the Japanese, and Americans come to light, especially in how these relationships continue to play out in the Marshall Islands³⁸. I will explore this through the discourse of victimization, where colonial discourses continue to reproduce.

Hezel (2000) expresses his worry about the Marshallese adaption of the discourse of victimization. His concern was sparked after conversing with a West African man who viewed himself as a victim of an irreversible fate due to colonialism and exploitation by others imposed on him. A discourse of victimization can evolve whenever new challenges arise, and instead of acting, people stay passive and accept the changes without hesitation. As a result, they become "subjected" to power (Foucault 1976:229-230): "When people begin to regard themselves as no more than victims, their fate is fixed" (Hezel 2000). However, Hezel recognizes the spirit of the Marshallese during the juridical pleas for compensation when they insisted on being viewed as survivors and not victims of nuclear testing. However, he is still worried that whenever Marshallese face new challenges or experience extensive changes, a discourse of victimization will evolve or be adapted again (Hezel 2000).

Dvorak also engages in the debate of such discourses in the Marshall Islands. "Operation homecoming" which included the several protests based on the land dispute regarding land

³⁸ The materialized ruination process discussed in chapter three, is an example of this.

ownership and land rights on Kwajalein after the population was relocated and replaced with military bases. First, the Japanese constructed their marine base, and later after the war battles during the Pacific war, the U.S. developed a naval base on Kwajalein (Dvorak 2018:168-169). The land dispute over Kwajalein involved landowners who had to relocate and rent their land to the U.S. government, enforced by the agreement between the U.S. government and the RMI government. Tensions between landowners and the national government emerged as the political authority, and decision-making had developed into a republic (Dvorak 2018:214-216). In addition, “operation homecoming” has been impactful to the narratives of the broader Marshallese experience since the nuclear testing era. Other atolls and islands in the RMI also engaged in the disputes and negotiations during the pleas for compensation from the U.S. government and the COFA (Dvorak 2018:200-202,208, Hezel 1995:328-331).

These disputes Dvorak argues, have led to a reproduction of colonial discourses and, over the years, evolved into a global discourse of the Marshallese as victims of horrific events (Dvorak 2018:187). The concrete layers of history involving the new participants of the Marshallese history are producing new narratives and discourses about the islands in a political sense, and this history becomes rewritten by multiple local and global actors, Dvorak argues (Dvorak 2018:181). I argue that such processes of “concrete histories” apply to the whole of the Marshall Islands and not only Kwajalein. Marshallese narratives are based on experiences from people across the islands who have also been affected by such new layers throughout history; they have been imposed to act the role of victims by others (Dvorak 2018:183-184,189-190).

Mainly concerned with the various discourses, local and global, which Dvorak views as part of the postwar development discourse (Dvorak 2018:183). Ebeye, the densely populated island of Kwajalein Atoll, is where most people from the surrounding islands in the chain were relocated during the U.S. militarization. Since this, Dvorak argues that Ebeye has been described as a “slum” or even “the slum of the Pacific” by Americans, the media, and others (Dvorak 2018:182-185). Such statements have considered Ebeye as a place of poor conditions for the people who live there regarding sanitation, the increasing population, water shortage, and several health problems and diseases (Dvorak 2018:172). I believe that some of these discourses are produced in a discriminative fashion to not just the Ebeye residents but Marshallese and even Micronesians in general, as there is a Pacific hierarchy still to this day where Micronesians are viewed to be of the lowest “rank”. I noticed similar discriminating discourses against the Marshall Islands and Micronesia in Hawai’i and Majuro. For example, people would say that Marshallese are dirty, lazy, ungrateful, and nasty. I completely dissociate myself from these

statements, but it is worth mentioning that discourses like this are reproduced and visible in the Pacific today. Kathy Jetn̄il-Kijiner addresses this type of discrimination in her poem “Lessons from Hawai’i,” which describes her encounter with the Polynesian Hawai’i (Jetn̄il-Kijiner 2017:45-49).

Lesson number 2:

Micronesian

MICRO

(nesian)

As in small.

Tiny crumbs of islands scattered

Across the Pacific Ocean.

Too many countries/ cultures/ nations no one

Has heard about/ cares about/ too small

To notice.

Small like how

I feel

When the lady at the salon

Delicately tracing white across my nail

Stops and says

You don’t look

Micronesian.

You’re much prettier.

(Jetn̄il-Kijiner 2017:45-46).

Even though this is not the type of narrative I am mainly concerned with within this chapter, I view it as an essential part of the complex discourses which also influence the way Marshallese islanders experience marginalization and discrimination in the diaspora within the Pacific region³⁹.

The discourse of victimization Dvorak has argued, is also applied by the Marshallese themselves. He discusses how Kwajalein landowners realized that if they began to portray Ebeye as a slum, they could get across the experiences of the American militaristic injustices on their people to the global community (Dvorak 2018:183,189).

“This is not to say that Ebeye wasn’t in fact suffering from severe infrastructure, sanitation, and population challenges, but that describing Ebeye in such bleak terms was one of the only ways local leaders could call attention to the injustices that American militarism had created” (Dvorak 2018:183).

I argue that this can be compared to how both Marshallese nuclear activists and climate activists have adopted the role of victims in the chaos created by others throughout the years. It becomes powerful rhetoric when approaching the international community to highlight severe experiences of nuclear injustice and climate change, as Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner did during the UN conference in 2014, for example. Or when approaching the high emitting countries of the world and telling them to act and reduce their emissions to save the Marshall Islands, which I get back to later. However, the victimization discourse worries several scholars who have worked in the Marshalls, including Francis Hezel, Greg Dvorak, and Peter Rudiak-Gould. “As impacts intensify, climate change will become the new radiation, the catch-all explanation for negative change” (Rudiak-Gould 2013:184), as expressed by Rudiak-Gould in his theory of trajectory about risk and perceptions in the Marshallese climate change debate (Rudiak-Gould 2013:180-184).

Both discourses are produced and debated concerning each other, and much of the Marshallese activism connect climate change to the nuclear era in the Islands. Still, I don’t necessarily agree that climate change will become the equivalent of radiation and result in the “Catch-all explanation for negative change” (Rudiak-Gould 2013:184) in the Marshall Islands. I instead argue that the nuclear age institutes as a *point of reference* of what change can mean in the Marshallese context, based on the memories and experiences with what challenges and crises

³⁹ More on discrimination, see Genz (2018:192-193).

have encompassed in the past. Based on the dual threat of climate change and nuclear radiation, Marshallese will connect future events to the past. Similarly, to the fear of the cracking of Runit Dome and the leaking of nuclear waste into the ocean due to rising sea levels due to increased global climate change. This eerie irony describes how the Marshall Islands and its people have been affected twice by the world's powers. The past will be revealed when the waves crash higher and the sea rises. Consequentially, the dual threat of radiation and climate change can cause twice as much disaster. The Nuclear threat is still apparent and not just a traumatic memory from the past. I have shown the connection between the nuclear age and climate change throughout this thesis, and it is not a connection based on how Marshallese would "typically" react to a threat or challenges and crises (Rudiak-Gould 2013:80-84). But radiation and climate change are viewed as current threats to the Marshall Islands and the Marshallese existence. This becomes evident in the Marshallese climate activism as well. The duality of crises and challenges in the Marshall Islands transmit the duality of contradictions in discourses.

Still, there is a specific difference between nuclear activism opposed to climate activism in the Marshall Islands. Nuclear justice activism deals with the consequences of the fact that the U.S. military harmed the Marshall Islands and its population, already aware of the severe repercussions it could cause for the Marshallese people and islands (Barker 2004:20-24). Climate change is not an intentional act opposed by anyone, but it is often blamed on the larger and more powerful nations in the world. Hence, it is interesting to apply the question of blame in the Marshallese context. How does the discourse of Marshallese's involvement in the creation of climate change reflect the local interpretations of this extensive global crisis?

Who started climate change? Blame and self-understanding

No one

Will come and devour you

No greedy whale of a company sharking through political seas

No backwater bullying of businesses with broken morals

No blindfolded bureaucracies gonna push

This mother ocean over

The edge

Excerpt from “Dear Matefele Peinam” (Jetñil-Kijiner 2017:71)

If climate change isn't an intentional act performed by anyone, why are we still searching for someone or something to blame for the effects of climate change? From politicians to businesses to the whole of humankind, who is to blame for climate change? Rudiak-Gould approaches the question of blame in the Marshall Islands from two perspectives. The first term he introduces is “industrial blame,” which deals with how climate change is a consequence based on the number of greenhouse emissions by industrial countries (even industries and specific companies) and includes countries such as China, the USA, and Australia. These then become targeted for the blame and cause of climate change through the approach of industrial blame. The other term, “universal blame” views climate change as humanity's own self-destruction, and this approach to blame deals with people's contributions to climate change. These two terms are used throughout Rudiak-Gould's discussion about the moral framings of climate change in the Marshall Islands (Rudiak-Gould 2013:118-121). Finally, his general interpretation based on his ethnographic studies in the Islands, Marshallese usually and more often apply a perspective of universal blame when speaking about climate change, even though statistically, the Marshall Islands is one of the least emitting countries in the world (Rudiak-Gould 2013:121,142-143).

Barnett and Campbell argued in their book *Climate Change and Small Island States: Power, Knowledge and the South Pacific* (2010:2), that a focus on vulnerability to climate change could lead to overlooking the social factors that can reduce the risk of damages from climate change. In addition, they argue that a focus on adaptation and local solutions to climate change has gained little consideration in the climate debate. Because as Pacific countries push the more developed countries an imbalance occurs due to Pacific countries' dependence on these countries to contribute economically so that Pacific nations and other vulnerable countries to climate change can adapt to climate change. They argued that this forces the developing countries, most threatened by climate change, to victimize their role as being vulnerable when contributing to the fight against climate change (Barnett & Campbell 2010:9-10). Resiliency and vulnerability then become two sides to the same story, and the institutionalized discourse seems to rewrite the history and power structures. I now explore the perspective of blame and self-understanding by exploring Camilla Borrevik's doctoral thesis about Pacific climate leadership and engagement between local and global contributors in the international negotiations on climate change (Borrevik 2019).

Ironically Camilla Borrevik's main title of her Ph.D. thesis on the Pacific climate leadership is "We started climate change", but the story behind this quote does not deal with the question of blame as discussed in this section. The title of her thesis refers to the learning process of Pacific Islanders "to do climate change" at the Conference of the Parties (COP), and to their engagement in the global bureaucratic processes about climate change (Borrevik 2019:77-78). In Borrevik's empirical example of the young Marshallese activist Selina Leem's speech at the 21st UNFCCC Conference of the Parties session in Paris (COP21), familiar rhetoric of universal blame is performed (Rudiak-Gould 2013:120-121). Borrevik describes how the COP21 audience reacted to Selina's speech. She describes how the entire audience paid close attention to Selina's speech when she told the story about climate change in her island home, the Marshall Islands. Selina spoke about the responsibilities that the participating nations who signed the Paris Agreement⁴⁰ hold to save her islands. And that by coming together in this way, they can prevent other countries from experiencing the same as what she and her people are already affected by in their everyday lives with climate change (Borrevik 2019:214-216). This rhetoric is an example of how the Marshallese take responsibility with the global community to fight climate change: therefore, they project a perspective of universal blame and self-blame in the moral framings of climate change (Rudiak-Gould 2013:121).

Borrevik describes how the rhetoric in Selina's speech got the attention of all the international leaders at the conference, and the entire room went silent during her speech. She also points out how Selina's descriptions of the Marshallese experience with climate change were recognized on the global stage of climate politics (Borrevik 2019:214-216). When focusing on the Pacific involvement in discussions about climate change at international and political arenas such as COP, Borrevik argues that Pacific Islanders move away from being the most vulnerable countries to climate change. Instead, they are the countries that take a global lead to move forward in the fight against climate change (Borrevik 2019:261). I will follow up on Borrevik's main discussion of how Pacific Islanders "do climate change" across local and global contexts later (Borrevik 2019:77-78). First, I wish to explore how local campaigns in Majuro adopt a universal perspective and self-blame of climate change focusing on what the local community can do to contribute to the fight against climate change. They are aware of their contribution to climate change. I will discuss this through an empirical example below.

⁴⁰ The first international binding agreement with ambitious efforts to reduce climate change (UNFCCC, "What is the Paris Agreement?").

The Parrotfish campaign

During a meeting I attended with a climate club in Majuro, the youth participants planned out events for the upcoming school semester, including fundraisers, appointing new leaders, and organizing the meeting calendar and social gatherings. In addition, ideas for the semester campaign were on the agenda of this first meeting of the year. The club focuses on a one campaign every semester to raise awareness in the local community and to engage in a change for the better of the climate. While deciding on the theme for the campaign, the teenagers started talking about how people in their community contribute to climate change. The discussions began when speaking about the landscape in Majuro, such as the waste along the shore causing ocean pollution. This sparked the idea of organizing a beach cleanup and building recycling bins to raise awareness of the current situation. Suddenly the conversation changed into a discussion about what Marshallese have done over the years, that might have affected the increasing climate change. And the youth decided that they could focus the campaign on the parrotfish, considered a delicacy to Marshallese. according to several of the clubs' members, the parrotfish had recently been considered a threatened species. The parrotfish is an integral part of the coral reef's ecosystem but has now become an endangered species due to coral bleaching, increased sea temperatures, and overfishing. The arguments regarding the importance of the parrotfish to marine life in the Marshall Islands were plentiful, and the group agreed to focus on informing the public of its significance and endangerment through this upcoming semester's campaign. I argue that this exemplifies how they adapt a universal perspective of blame as they decide to protect their islands' reefs and take responsibility for their "actions".

Throughout several meetings, the group discussed how they would spread information and how they could influence the politicians to recognize the demand to protect the parrotfish. During the meetings, the youth explained how they would proceed to collect signatures which they, in turn, could hand over to the government. Some of the youth also expressed connections to people in the government who might influence other politicians to support their campaign. The club members were optimistic though they did mention that it could become tricky to convince chiefs to support their campaign. They explained that the parrotfish is traditionally valued among *irooj* because, as someone put it "Chiefs do as they please" and serving parrotfish at big social gatherings expresses wealth, in addition to being part of a traditional Marshallese diet. They compared it to the hunting of turtles that had been regulated a couple of years ago due to an extensive campaign both globally and locally to "save the turtles". The youth told me that

no matter the regulations and focus on saving the turtles, people in the Islands would still hunt for turtles. Turtles are, for example, still served at *kemems*⁴¹ (1st birthdays), to show off the wealth of families. To this day, *kemems* are significant events in the RMI, celebrated with balloons, gracious venues, food, and gifts to all the guests who participate in the special day. Such gifts can be 1 dollar for every guest, or blanket, food, jewelry, and even the decorations guests can take home after the festivities. People told me that families could take up big loans to pay for the *kemem* of their child and that these festivities are essential to celebrate the baby's life and show off the family's wealth. Hezel has also noted how *kemems* have become important to display wealth or a certain rank (Hezel 2001:78). The serving of turtles as part of the menu at a *kemem* would add to the portrayal of wealth.

This empirical example brings to light two interesting notions regarding the Marshallese approach to blaming climate change. First, the Marshallese youth immediately recognized their contributions to climate change and decided to act upon it locally. The local actions result in a change that may impact important cultural and traditional traits in the Marshallese *manit*⁴². Regulations might not affect the acts of the people to the extent that the youth activists hope. They acknowledge that to act locally on climate change (based on the notion of universal blame), they must change embedded parts of their *manit*, and by doing this, they hope to save the most crucial part of their *manit*, the land.

In a way, it is paradox that to save their islands and tradition they must give up significant traditional traits of their identity. For example, to live the Marshallese way of life includes the fishing from the sea and sharing food in a social gathering or celebration (Rudiak-Gould 2013:16-17,22-23). It becomes contradicting because in quitting this traditional act, they hope to save their life in the islands, yet "quitting tradition" is a part of the fear of losing their embedded relation to land. Like the consequences of lost knowledge due to relocations of communities (Genz 2018). Eventually, they risk losing essential elements of what it means to be Marshallese. If the land disappears, they can no longer hunt for turtles or fish for parrotfish or celebrate *kemems* in the Islands. I have noted that life and land are deeply embedded: "We are nothing without our Islands" (Jetñil-Kijiner 2017:66-67). Yet, this contradicts the statement

⁴¹ *Kemem* is the celebration of a baby's first year. It is a Marshallese tradition which is celebrated every 1st year of a baby's life. Such celebrations are common for several of the Pacific Islands, and globally as well since the 1st year of a person's life has historically been the most uncertain year. It is said that only after the first year the baby will live.

⁴² *Manit*, see page 45-46

“We have no culture anymore”, and with the revitalization of traditional knowledge and skills in relocated communities (Genz 2018). It also contradicts the notion that some Marshallese have already had to move away from their home islands due to nuclear contamination. But mostly continue to identify through the land where they are no longer living.

The connection to the land is weakened due to colonization and militarization. Additionally, the loss of land has included the loss of significant knowledge and skills. While some of this has been revitalized through the experience of not being physically attached to the land but rather through collective traumas (Genz 2018:4). Therefore, I ask if perhaps these conflicting arguments eventually become an integrated part of a “Marshallese way” in the present context? Is it not just about “coming to terms” (Rudiak-Gould 2013:21) with history but rather to explore an existence both within and beyond the cluster of challenges and crises? I argue that the Marshallese climate change activism and *manit* is performed through storytelling. Hence the Marshallese existence is discussed and performed by the Marshallese themselves.

Nevertheless, the perspective which portrays the Marshallese (and the rest of the Pacific) as vulnerable communities and possible climate refugees also contradicts the Marshallese and the Pacific grassroots community’s view of themselves as warriors rather than only being the victims of climate change. «We are not drowning. We are fighting”, has become the parole of Pacific Islander activists in the Pacific activist group 350 Pacific (Steiner 2015:151-152). In addition, when adopting a universal perspective to blame and projecting it to the global community, Pacific Islanders step away from the discourse of victimization. This is extended through the Pacific global leadership documented by Borrevik (2019). In the next section, I will further explore this Pacific unity and the climate leadership that the Marshallese are part of. I consider it necessary to include the entire region of which the Marshall Islands is due to its shared history and traditions, a shared fight against climate change, and self-determination (Teaiwa 2018). This becomes relevant to my discussion later dealing with storytelling and agency in the Marshallese activism, which follows up on how *manit* is performed and how the Marshallese discuss their existence through storytelling and activism.

Pacific unity

In Katerina Teaiwa's article "Our Rising Sea of Islands: Pan-Pacific regionalism in the age of climate change" (2018), she elaborates on Epeli Hau'ofa's "Our sea of islands". She reflects Hau'ofa in the light of climate change along with other Pacific themes in the 21st century (Teaiwa 2018:27-28). While Hau'ofa was interested in outlining the connectivity between the Pacific Islands, based on the shared history and genealogy stretched across the Pacific Ocean (Hau'ofa 1993). Teaiwa, on the other hand, elaborates this to an argument about not just the shared history of Pacific people but also the collective solidarity across the region and an Oceanic identity that deals with self-determination (Teaiwa 2018:26,29). She notes that the "Pan-Pacific" solidarity is based on regional activism in the Pacific that has been and continues to be critical in climate change (Teaiwa 2018:29). The Pacific activism and rhetoric are forced by collective memories and shared experiences across islands, nations, ethnicity, and regions. Teaiwa also argues that the way Pacific leaders, politicians, and activists articulate experiences of living with climate change. Through a common and shared Pacific genealogy, often through art such as music and poetry, integrates into a dynamic vision of hope as Pacific ideas evolve and travel across the ocean (Teaiwa 2018: 34-36). An oceanic identity and Pan-Pacific unity are eventually about self-determination, the Pacific way, defined by Pacific peoples, Teaiwa argues (Teaiwa 2018:37). Teaiwa's main argument is that the shared and common heritage of Pacific Islanders is the main force for rewriting the discourse of any victimization of Pacific people. Especially in the time of climate change when the belittling discourse is still apparent, not unlike the belittlement discourse described by Hau'ofa (Teaiwa 2018:30-33).

Throughout this discussion on Pacific Islanders' role in the international climate change scene, Pacific Islanders are viewed to have become professional, not only to play the role of victims. But also, as we will see, they encompass the skill to switch between being warriors and victims in various contexts (Borrevik 2019, Hezel 2000, Steiner 2015). The following section will, therefore, elaborate on the Marshallese climate leadership and present an example of how the Marshallese play these various roles in the global discussions on climate change. I will later link this to the discussion where I discuss how the skills of acting in both roles are applied to the performance of lived experiences through storytelling, art, poetry, political speech, or music. All that is eventually part of a continuation and reproduction of important traditions that are reinforced and perhaps become even more relevant and vital in the time of climate change.

The Marshallese could choose to merely focus on acting the role of victims, to point their fingers at the most emitting countries in the world, including their past colonizers, and the U.S. military.

But instead, when it comes to the blaming and the discourses about past events and the constant increasing change in the islands, the Marshallese choose to focus on their local contributions in search of solutions for the future. This is not to say that the victimization discourse is no longer relevant. Because as Steiner (2015:169) has argued, it is due to the tendency to victimize developing countries in the climate change discourse that makes Pacific Islanders able to move away from adopting the role of victims and instead play the roles as warriors. Despite the challenges and crises, the Marshallese have faced or maybe just because of these experiences, the discourse about the Marshallese since the nuclear era have shifted from being a victimizing character to a discourse of survivors (Hezel 2000). When describing themselves as survivors and warriors, the Marshallese take control over their lived experiences and partakes in the shaping of their future, not only to be interpreted and viewed by others but also to take control over their history. Eventually this is part of the larger post-colonial, indigenous movement, as Teaiwa (2018) discussed.

I also argue that the Marshallese, in the process of “coming to terms” (Rudiak-Gould 2013:21) with history, embody the qualifications of what Ortner defined as “complex subjectivity,” which in short is what agency presupposes. Still, it also deals with how subjectivities are culturally and emotionally complex, in addition to how they are constantly observing and acknowledging the world in which surrounds them and their relationships to it (Ortner 2005:45, Rudiak-Gould 2013:21). Through the Marshallese fight for nuclear justice and against climate change, it is explored how subjectively the condition of subjection has evolved through their experiences with such challenges and crises. And how this has become performed through the agency in the fight to rewrite narratives about their worldview. Narratives evolve based on their consciousness of being aware of their surroundings (Ortner 2005:34,45). And even though some scholars have feared that the Marshallese will not only come to adopt the victimization discourse but eventually become the victims when faced with new challenges and crises. I argue that the Marshallese through activism is in the process of doing the exact opposite, in the way that they are aware of their role and the role others have played in their history. Let me explore this further through the Marshallese climate leadership.

“Two degrees”: Marshallese climate leadership

I will begin this section with an excerpt from the Hon. Tony deBrum’s (1945-2017) acceptance speech at the Right Livelihood in 2015⁴³. According to a New York Times article announcement of deBrum’s death, he is described as a “national hero” in the RMI by the (former) President Hilda Heine (Friedman 2017). In addition, deBrum was a nuclear witness in Marshall Island’s fight for nuclear justice and promotion of a nuclear-free world and he would also become an important pioneer in the Marshallese fight against climate change. He represented the RMI government on several occasions and described the impacts of climate change in the Marshall Islands as he had witnessed it with his own eyes as a Marshallese islander (Friedman 2017). In his speech at the Right Livelihood award ceremony in 2015, Tony deBrum spoke about his memories from the nuclear tests on his home Island, especially the largest nuclear detonation – “the Bravo shot⁴⁴”. Later about his experiences with climate change and how he is working towards a global commitment to do more to fight climate change, where he connects the global involvement to these crises (deBrum 2015).

I would ask of you a question I asked at the United Nations in April- how many in this room have personally witnessed nuclear weapon detonations?

I have as a young boy at Likiep atoll in the northern Marshall Islands.

When I was nine years old, I remember well the 1954 Bravo shot at Bikini atoll- the largest detonation the world had ever seen, 1000 times the power of the Hiroshima blast. It was the morning, and I was fishing with my grandfather. He was throwing the net and suddenly the silent bright flash, and then a force, the shock wave. Everything turned red, the ocean, the fish, the sky and my grandfather’s net. And we were 200 miles away from ground zero. A memory that can never be erased. And one of many from the Marshallese which must inform and underpin global political will on nuclear disarmament.

After my journey here in Stockholm and Geneva, I will arrive in Paris to help lead very challenging climate negotiations. Where the world is trying to define a long-term treaty

⁴³ In 2015, Tony deBrum was honored with the Right Livelihood Award, which is given to “change-makers” and people who promote and work for long-term social change (The Right Livelihood, “The Right Livelihood Award”).

⁴⁴ See “Castle Bravo” on page 34.

which will underpin national action from all. But what kind of agreement will it be? The Marshall Islands is a low-lying nation, with an average height of little more than a meter above sea-level. Atolls often so narrow you can stand in the lagoon water and look across the land to witness the ocean waves crashing on the other side. The world is well off track to deliver safe levels of ambition. And we must carve out a roadmap and commitment to do more, to not stop until global emissions are at levels which assure our survival. Because it cannot and will not be that the Marshallese will ever again bear such global burdens.

(Tony deBrum 2015)

Soon after, deBrum traveled to Paris, where he played a crucial role in mobilizing global climate ambition for the Paris Agreement at COP21.

At a climate conference

A colleague tells me 2 degrees

Is just a benchmark for negotiations

I tell him for my islands 2 degrees

Is a gamble

At 2 degrees my islands

Will already be under water

This is why our leaders push

For 1.5

This excerpt is from the poem “2 Degrees” (Jetñil-Kijiner 2017:77), referring to the COP21 negotiations concerning the goal of 1.5 degrees Celsius pre-industrial levels. 2 degrees Celsius was the initial goal of the world leaders before COP21 in Paris, 2015. Camilla Borrevik’s research, based on ethnographic fieldwork from COP21 in Paris, COP22 in Marrakech, and COP23 in Bonn, Germany, involves observations on Pacific Island agency and their involvement in global decision making (Borrevik 2019). In the ethnography from COP21, Borrevik describes how the Marshallese, along with other Pacific Islands, argued that a

temperature of pre-industrial levels at 2 degrees Celsius would have severe consequences for their islands. Especially since Pacific Islands already face several climate-related challenges (Borrevik 2019:210, 248-249). The global commitment to decrease greenhouse gas emissions to keep global warming below 2 degrees was challenged by a Marshallese initiative in establishing the High Ambition Coalition at COP21. RMI minister Tony deBrum initiated the coalition. Borrevik notes how the initiative for a goal of 1.5 degrees instead of 2 degrees led to an intense debate between developing and developed countries. She notes that the developed countries pushed for 2 degrees against the developing countries' 1.5 degrees. Finally, both goals were mentioned in the Paris Agreement (Borrevik 2019:212-213). Based on Borrevik's example of this Marshallese and Pacific engagement in global discussions about climate change, I argue that COP21 symbolizes an important turning point in the Marshallese fight against climate change.

Tell them we don't know
Of the politics
Or the science
But tell them we see
What's in our own backyard

Excerpt from "Tell them" (Jetñil-Kijiner 2017:66)

Several Pacific Islands, including the Marshall Islands, are at the forefront of experiencing the threats of climate change. They call for action because a global commitment to fight climate change must be made. Borrevik has argued that between the local and national interests and the global threat of climate change, friction occurs, and "Climate change stories" becomes the Pacific response in negotiating such frictions of disagreements among various global interests (Borrevik 2019: 21-22). She describes Pacific Climate Change Stories to be the reflections of local experiences of living with climate change in the Pacific. The stories are performed and create a connection between the Pacific Islands and the global decision-makers (Borrevik 2019:4-5,14). Borrevik argues that Pacific Islanders had to learn how "to do climate change", and this included telling their stories about climate change to be recognized by the international policymakers: this meant that they had to negotiate their role as vulnerable and victims of

climate change and their role as warriors being at the frontline of climate change (Borrevik 2019:77-78).

In addition, the way these climate change stories are presented and performed, Borrevik notes draws on the Pacific tradition of storytelling and the sharing of knowledge through belonging to a specific place (Borrevik 2019:14,103,240). Eventually, Borrevik's argues that Pacific people can say something about climate change because they recognize it and know it based on their experiences of living on Pacific Islands where climate change occurs. When they present these local experiences to the global world through stories, they eventually testify to climate change. "They also provide insights into how humans live in the world and create their own perceptions about their surroundings" (Borrevik 2019:86). Similar storytelling is also part Marshallese climate activism and the Majuro local activist scene. In contrast it often connects challenges and crises throughout history based on mythical stories, narratives from ancestors and firsthand experiences. By applying this to a poem, song, painting, etc., they discuss their existence through performances of storytelling.

The activist scene in Majuro and the next generation

No one's drowning, baby

No one's moving

No one's losing

Their homeland

No one's gonna become

A climate refugee

Or should I say

No one else

To the Carteret islanders of Papua New Guinea

And to the taro islanders of Solomon Islands

I take this moment

To apologize to you

We are drawing the line here

Because baby we are going to fight

Your mommy daddy

Bubu Jimma your country and president too

We will all fight

(Jetñil-Kijiner 2017:71)

This is an excerpt from “Dear Matefele Peinam” (Jetñil-Kijiner 2017:70-73), a poem that Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner performed at the opening of the United Nations Secretary-General’s Climate Summit in New York in 2014. The poem is a testimony to protecting her newborn daughter’s future in her island home, the Marshall Islands. The poem is also a declaration to the world that the Marshallese people, across generations and political statuses consisting of bubu’s, mommies, daddies, and the president, are going to fight to secure that future.

Several local actors and the RMI political leaders and government are engaged in the international policymaking and debates about climate change. In the Marshall Islands, there are several non-governmental organizations (NGOs), some of which are grassroots organizations working on climate awareness in local communities. In addition, they prepare the younger

generations to become the next climate leaders. These NGOs primarily consist of youth and young adults, who are “the next generation” regarding climate change. When they grow up, they are the ones who will experience the more intensified change and must deal with arising new challenges of living on an atoll in a way that their ancestors never experienced. The next generation is also part of the global discourse of including youth and their future children when debating what kind of world will be left for the next generations. Kathy’s poem “Dear Matafele Peinam”, for example, is an example of this discourse with a focus on the next generation of Marshall Islanders as she speaks to her newborn child (Jetn̄il-Kijiner 2017:70-73).

The Marshall Islands has an increasingly young population, with 37% of the total population being 14 years old and younger (statistics from 2019) (UNESCO 2019). Carucci discusses how a youth category becomes problematic when applied to the RMI context. He states that because the category is a relatively new part of the lifecycle in the Islands, “youth” has been appropriated to represent the period between childhood and mature adults and is eventually a product of the colonial and globalizing era (Carucci 2019:203-204). From my experience in the field, most of my interlocutors are categorized as youth and young adults who grew up either in the Marshall Islands or in the United States and later moved to the islands to study and work or vice versa. Therefore, the category of youth I choose to operate with is people between the ages of 15-30, some of whom are still in high school or pursuing higher education, along with young adults who are at the early stage of their careers. Most of my interlocutors are therefore educated or pursuing education in some way or another. Nevertheless, the Marshall Islands has an increasing young generation who are also the “next generation” of the Marshall Islands. They are the ones who will face the predicted increasing global climate change along with other challenges in the “future”. In other words, they are the “future”.

Caney and Lee (2019) are interested in the study of youth in the Pacific due to the increasingly young population throughout the Pacific Islands. The general discourse about youth in the Pacific, they argue, tends to focus on the violence and trouble of Pacific youth in “youth problems”, instead of focusing on the youth’s resilience and their room for maneuvering various opportunities and contributions in their communities (Caney & Lee 2019:4-6). They argue that the discourse of “youth problems,” is based on a focus on development relating to the economy, education, and inequalities due to migration from rural communities to more urban areas on Pacific Islands (Craney & Lee 2019:7-8). Government initiatives to focus on youth often implement the discourse that “youth in the Pacific are troublemakers”, as a result, there has

been an increased focus on implementing youth services to prevent teen pregnancy and the use of drugs (Caney & Lee 2019:7-9).

Although there are similar types of youth services in Majuro that focus on teen pregnancy, drugs, and other youth-related “issues”, I have chosen to focus on the positive contribution of youth within their local communities as suggested by Craney and Lee (2019:4-6). Even though it is necessary to acknowledge youth problems as perhaps an effect of colonial times and the marginalization of Pacific Islanders. Focusing only on this can also result in a possibly increased feeling of “hopelessness” related to climate change and future outlooks as part of Pacific youth realities and eventually turn into a discourse of victimization (Hezel 2000). Instead, I follow Craney and Lee’s example to focus on the positive contribution of the Marshallese youth and how they are preparing to become “the next generation” (2019:8-11).

Craney and Lee also documented the tendency of Pacific elders to assume that youth will reject essential aspects of culture and tradition and instead choose the benefits that come from global modernity (Craney & Lee 2019:12). Partly, this occurred in the Marshall Islands in post the nuclear era and after the relocation of islanders due to radiation contamination as well. Resulting in the loss of essential traditional skills and knowledge because of generational tensions between elder and younger Marshallese (Tobin 2002:8-11). In addition, relocation, and loss of land, have contributed to a weakened connection to the environment where they would usually apply such skills and knowledge (Genz 2018:4-6). I wish to argue that climate activism not only highlights the overlapping and connection between challenges and crises in the Marshall Islands. Instead through the youth’s engagement in activism historical and traditional narratives continue to confirm a Marshallese existence and explore new ideas for adaptation and solutions to climate change. It is worth mentioning that when the Marshall Islands participate in COP and other global climate summits, they bring representatives from the local climate change movements. Usually, young activists who are invited to speak on behalf of the nation’s future, such as in Borrevik’s ethnography from COP21, when Selina Leem spoke about her lived experiences of climate change in the Marshall Islands to the world leaders (Borrevik 2019:214-217). The younger generation has a degree of legitimacy in the local Majuro climate scene. Because their views and ideas are valued and appreciated by the government, the youth are invited to participate in local debates and workshops regarding climate change.

The activist scene in Majuro focuses on local issues and solutions to contribute to the fight against climate change - and how to lower green gas emissions to contribute to the global commitment of the Paris Agreement. The Marshallese face several cultural dilemmas while

discussing local initiatives as a vital part of their contribution to the fight against climate change. There is a constant conflict between climate change and cultural change in the local climate change scene.

As mentioned, I lived with two American film students during my two first weeks in Majuro. They had traveled to Majuro to film a documentary about climate change in the Marshall Islands. Their project engaged the youth in Majuro to share art, stories, experiences, and opinions on climate change. As a result, youth were welcomed to our home to record music and poetry. I was lucky to sit in and watch and listen to the recordings. The room became quiet when a song or a poem was performed and recorded. The performances often started in a nervous tone, but after a couple of takes, it got calmer and more comfortable. Several of the teenagers would present their songs or poetry in different ways several times, testing out the right “sound” or “expression”, of the performance. The performance of the songs and poetry was just as important as the content and message of what they were performing. When activism is performed through poetry, music, or dance, the audience gets a chance to listen to or watch a story unfold. Marshallese have a significant way of conveying their message through storytelling and traditional *bwebwenato*. at the United Nations convention, Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner’s performance of “Dear Matafele Peinam” (Jetñil-Kijiner 2017), is a clear example of this. Similarly, Steiner quotes what Kathy once said during her process of writing a poem; what she is most concerned about is how the story will be told (Steiner 2015:170).

In an interview with the Samoan writer Albert Wendt conducted by Juniper Ellis, Wendt discusses his rhetoric and literary notions of Pacific storytelling in his novels and literary works (Ellis 1997). Wendt describes how he has adopted oral storytelling traditions into his writing and that storytelling is about the various ways of keeping an audience interested and entertained. Therefore, Wendt states that the storyteller has the power and skills to shape a story to engage its audience and leave some things unspoken and up for interpretation (Ellis 1997:83-84). Wendt explains how much of the Pacific history has been described in terms of Western explorers and colonists. Still, in continuing the tradition of Pacific storytelling into literature, he argues that a new version of this history is added, written by the participants of the historical contexts. He believes this type of storytelling through art, poetry, and music are expressions of the Pacific people’s reaction to colonialism (Ellis 1997: 89-90).

Kathy’s poetry is an example that not only discuss the Marshallese stories about the nuclear age or climate change but also describes embodied experiences of Marshallese life-worlds. The stories differ from what statistics can tell because they are not based on data collected and

presented in an article or a book. But instead, they're based on lived experiences, expressed in a specific and unique way. The way the younger generation of Marshallese artists today, through their poetry, music, and art, put their experiences of climate change into words represent their Marshallese reality. And, in this way, they take control over the narratives based on a complex history and eventually become part of cultural revitalization, where stories are preserved and forged in a time of resilience to outside threats and continuing "tradition" (Genz 2018, Rudiak-Gould 2013). Through storytelling, the Marshallese youth put into words experiences and reflections of living on the atoll islands in the present time.

Marshallese youth tell stories about the present context of living with an uncertain future while negotiating their existence and history. They are perhaps, in this way, not just "doing climate change" through storytelling (Borrevik 2019:77-78), but "doing history" in a more general sense through many different forms of narrative and performance. I argue that this is part of the process of coming to terms with history while simultaneously continuing the tradition of storytelling within the contemporary context (Rudiak-Gould 2013:21). When younger generations of Marshallese write poetry, music, speeches, or draw on their lived experiences, they reference their past, pre-colonial times, and post-nuclear times, along with their fears for the future. In this way, they critique the ongoing processes of how these historical events have imposed an inevitable change upon them. They are self-reflexive when they put their experiences of contradictions between playing the role of victims and warriors into the proper context in the chaos of challenges and crises (Ortner 2005:34, Steiner 2015). Another part of "doing history" in this sense is how they connect the challenges and crises based on experiences about history, such as the connection between the nuclear threat and climate change.

Experiences and stories from the past continue into new narratives about the present and visions of the future. It is all part of making sense of the present context, as in the case of Pacific climate change negotiators scaling up local stories into global significance (Borrevik 2019:77-78). I argue that the Marshallese explore the space of *manit* and what it means in the present context when physical challenges transform into narratives connected to the Marshallese identity and existence. A broader focus on Pacific unity in the fight against climate change has perhaps reinforced the Marshallese identity. When speaking about tradition and modernity and what once was and is no longer, the Marshallese eventually perform a Marshallese identity and all it encompasses. In the Marshallese global engagement on the international climate change scene, they possess a specific skill to negotiate their local and global position from being small and

isolated to being globally connected when sharing stories and taking on global leadership in the climate fight.

I wish to draw on Steiner's argument about why Pacific Islanders are warriors against climate change. She argues that due to the increasing threats of climate change, we must find a middle ground between hoping everything will be fine and believing there is no hope left in the world for stopping climate change (Steiner 2015:166). Either climate change will doom us all, or we can find solutions to live with the negative effects of climate change. The first perspective represents a victim's approach and the second a warrior's approach. Steiner also implies that a warrior is the one who can balance the two by recognizing the threats but refusing to give in (Steiner 2015:169-170). The Marshallese have witnessed their islands become uninhabitable before; therefore, when climate change once again threatens their islands, it is not surprising that the Marshallese recognize a similar fear of their island's existence. Additionally, climate change is already recognized as a global threat, while the nuclear weapons tests took place without any awareness of the world. The Marshall Islands have faced existential challenges and crises throughout history and global encounters. The local context has been completely overlooked. Rather, it has been taken advantage of in warfare and nuclear weapons tests that eventually forced people to relocate due to radiation contamination leaving islands uninhabitable.

The climate crisis is a global issue that currently affect places and people in different ways based on various local contexts. The Marshall Islands are at the frontline of the fight against climate change, and it is an interesting context to research the threats, consequences, and engagement with climate change. Most importantly, the Marshallese people are on the frontline of the fight against climate change. The ocean which has defined life in the Marshall Islands is now threatening life in the islands. The Marshallese continue to fight because they won't let history repeat itself. As Tony deBrum (2015) stated in his speech at the Right Livelihood award presentation: "it cannot and will not be that the Marshallese will ever again bear such global burdens". Only this time, the world might listen sooner because climate change affects us all, and the Marshall Islands reminds us that we are connected through the ocean.

Epilogue

This study shows how the Marshallese context is characterized by the complex history of challenges and crises that continue to unfold in the Marshall Islands. People connect past and present, eventually grounded in their worries, fears, and imaginings about the anticipated escalation of future challenges and crises. These connections are apparent through people's narratives, and the past, present, and future are visible through the material landscape.

There is a duality in Marshallese narratives are understood through the historical context of the Marshall Islands. As I have demonstrated people draw lines between the past, present, and future to contextualize their existence in narratives. In this way there is a duality between what Marshallese consider to be essential to their identity. The contradictions in such narratives are based on what they view to be tradition and modernity (Rudiak-Gould 2013), and essential to their *manit*. Or between coral and concrete (Dvorak 2018) of relationships that makes up the islands. Based on history, there are also contradictions within the discourses of being a victim and a warrior of the unfolding of events. The Marshall Islands is connected to the world by the ocean, and the Marshallese view their global engagement as necessary in the fight for nuclear justice and against climate change.

In the global Covid-19 pandemic outbreak, the RMI closed off their border and initiated an excessive preparedness program. "The islands are the safest place to be right now". Still, this preparedness was to ensure the islander's health with underlying diseases. Underlying conditions come from nuclear weapons testing and colonization. Today, climate change also increases the chances of new diseases in the islands. Climate change also threatens the entire Marshallese existence.

Climate change is an existential threat to the future of the Marshall Islands, increased by past events. The nuclear era is still evident in the islands. Runit Dome threatens not only the Marshallese existence but the entire world by leaking radiation into the sea when sea levels rise.

The ocean is the source of life in the islands, yet the ocean has become the most significant threat that can eventually destroy the islands. The statement "We are nothing without our islands" (Jetñil-Kijiner 2017:67) contradicts the fact that it is not uncommon for Marshallese to live already "without" their islands. But there is a significant difference between being permanently displaced because one's home is deadly due to nuclear weapons and being

temporarily away by living on urban islands or in the USA, still having an opportunity to return home.

As we await the destruction of Runit Dome and climate change, the Marshallese continue to fight for nuclear justice and climate change. Through climate engagement, especially the youth reproduce and create new narratives about the Marshallese context. *Bwebwenato* continues to share perspectives about the past and the present while taking a stand about the future: to “preserve” the future.

Appendix A: Resolution 83, declaration of a national climate crisis in the Republic of the Marshall Islands

Resolution 83

NITIJELA OF THE REPUBLIC OF THE MARSHALL ISLANDS
40TH CONSTITUTION REGULAR SESSION, 2019



Republic of the Marshall Islands
Jepilpilin Ke Ejukaan

RESOLUTION 83

A **RESOLUTION** requesting the Nitijela to declare National Climate Crises as a Low-Lying Coral Atoll Nation.

WHEREAS, the findings of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5°C; and

WHEREAS, highlighting the extreme vulnerability and special circumstances faced by low-lying coral atoll nations such as the Republic of the Marshall Islands – including projections for the significant or total loss of land mass and the implications for the security, human rights and wellbeing of the Marshallese people – and the continued difficulties as a low-lying coral atoll nation in mobilizing the necessary finance, support and investment from the international community to be able to adequately respond; and

WHEREAS, noting the Marshall Islands' climate leadership, including its 2050 "Til Eo" Climate Strategy to reach net zero emissions by 2050 and its enhanced Nationally Determined Contribution to reduce emissions by at least 32% on 2010 levels by 2025 and by at least 45% on 2010 levels by 2030; and

WHEREAS, Nitijela decides to unite fully and unequivocally behind the science recognize the calls of the youth of the Republic of the Marshall Islands and their right to a climate safe future to stand in solidarity with other vulnerable nations, including the membership of the Climate Vulnerable Forum and the Coalition of Atoll Nations on Climate Change; and

WHEREAS, the declaration of 'National Climate Crisis as a Low-Lying Coral Atoll Nation' to highlight the inadequate response thus far of the international community to respond to the global climate crisis of its own making, and the extreme vulnerability and special circumstances faced by the Marshall Islands as a result; and

WHEREAS, the declaration will direct the current and future governments of the Marshall Islands to ensure the fight against climate change remains the country's top priority, including most immediately through the finalization and implementation of a landmark National Adaptation Plan; and

WHEREAS, the Republic of the Marshall Islands is calling for the international community to consider additional ways to respond to and support the extreme vulnerability and special circumstances faced by the low-lying coral atoll nations of the world, and for other governments to urgently respond to the recent call by the UN Secretary-General to submit updated NDCs and 2050 decarbonization strategies in line with the spirit of the Paris Agreement and consistent with keeping temperature increases within 1.5°C; and

NOW THEREFOR BE IT RESOLVED, by the People of the Republic of the Marshall Islands, through their Nitijela at its 40th Constitutional Regular Session, 2019, that the Nitijela hereby approves, the declaration of "National Climate Crises as the Low-Lying Coral Atoll Nation.

CERTIFICATE

I hereby certify:

1. That Nitijela Resolution No: 83 was passed by the Nitijela of the Republic of the Marshall Islands on the 26th day of September 2019; and
2. That I am satisfied that Nitijela Resolution No: 83 was passed in accordance with the relevant provisions of the Constitution of the Republic of the Marshall Islands and the Rules of Procedures of the Nitijela.

I hereby place my signature before the Clerk this 30th day of September 2019.



Hon. Kenneth A. Kedi
Speaker
Nitijela of the Marshall Islands

Attest:



Morean S. Watak
Clerk
Nitijela of the Marshall Islands

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Figure 8: Resolution 83 (2019)

Appendix B: Resolution 03- declaration of a national health emergency due to the concern about the global spread of COVID-19

NITIJELA OF THE REPUBLIC OF THE MARSHALL ISLANDS
41ST CONSTITUTION REGULAR SESSION, 2020



Republic of the Marshall Islands
Jepilpilin Ke Ejukaan

RESOLUTION 03

A RESOLUTION requesting the Nitijela to confirm a Proclamation Declaring State of Health Emergency due to the Global Health Emergency of International Concern on the 2019 Novel Coronavirus issued by the President on behalf of the Cabinet on February 7, 2020, and shall remain in effect until the expiry of 12 months from date of certification or unless revoked earlier by the Cabinet.

WHEREAS, the World Health Organization has declared the Novel Coronavirus outbreak as Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC); and

WHEREAS, the 2019 Novel Coronavirus (nCoV) has not been identified in the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI); however, the threat of this new coronavirus being imported into Republic of the Marshall Islands continues to heighten. The Ministry of Health and Human Services (MoHHS) and border control agencies have been implementing health screenings at the Amata Kabua International Airport and Majuro Seaport since January 24, 2020. Meanwhile, over 60,000 confirmed cases have been identified worldwide, and the virus has claimed over 1300 lives in the People’s Republic of China (PRC), 1 in Hong Kong and 1 in Philippines; and

WHEREAS, there has been one coronavirus death outside of PRC that occurred in the Philippines on a 44-year old visitor from the city of Wuhan where the virus was first reported; and

WHEREAS, there is no confirmed treatment for nCoV except supportive care and isolation; and

WHEREAS, nCoV is considered to be highly contagious with prolonged contact and, to date, all of the exact modes of transmission are unknown; and

WHEREAS, healthcare providers, first responders and immediate contacts are at risk of contracting nCoV; and

WHEREAS, immune-compromised persons are the most vulnerable populations to develop severe complications and or death; and

WHEREAS, the MoHHS health infrastructure is limited and does not have sufficient resources to respond to an outbreak. Therefore, it is extremely important to halt the spread of nCoV virus within the RMI; and

WHEREAS, the RMI is home to more than 53,000 people living on 70 square miles of land spanning an area of more than 750,000 square miles of ocean in the Western Pacific and the transmission of nCoV can be extensive; and

WHEREAS, to implement an effective and efficient response against this nCoV, there is an urgent need for the whole of government and whole of society to cooperate and adhere to relevant instructions and protocols to prevent entry of the nCoV to RMI; and

WHEREAS, the RMI has been under a State of Health Emergency since August of 2019 because of a severe outbreak of dengue 3 which continues to be a major health issue to this day and that has devastated both the human and financial resources of the RMI; and

NOW THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, by the People of the Republic of the Marshall Islands, through their Nitijela at its 41st Constitutional Regular Session further to *Emergencies Act 1997*, hereby confirm that the Proclamation Declaring a State of Health Emergency due to the Global Health Emergency of International Concern on the 2019 Novel Coronavirus issued by the President on behalf of the Cabinet on February 7, 2020 and expires 12 months from the date of certification as set out above, unless revoked earlier by the Cabinet; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the President and the Cabinet shall execute the functions pursuant to the *Emergencies Act 1979*, relevant laws of the Republic and in line with the Nitijela's confirmation, with any modifications, if any, to further the

aims of the Proclamation Declaring a State of Health Emergency due to the Global Health Emergency of International Concern on the 2019 Novel Coronavirus.

CERTIFICATE

I hereby certify:

1. That Nitijela Resolution No: 03 was passed by the Nitijela of the Republic of the Marshall Islands on the 18th day of February 2020; and
2. That I am satisfied that Nitijela Resolution No: 03 was passed in accordance with the relevant provisions of the Constitution of the Republic of the Marshall Islands and the Rules of Procedures of the Nitijela.

I hereby place my signature before the Clerk this 18th day of February 2020.



Hon. Kenneth A. Kedi
Speaker
Nitijela of the Marshall Islands

Attest:



Morean S. Watak
Clerk
Nitijela of the Marshall Islands



Figure 9: Resolution 03 (2020)

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