

waka kuaka

The Journal of the Polynesian Society

VOLUME 133 No. 1, MARCH 2024

SPECIAL ISSUE:

in a room, in a house, on an island, in an ocean



The Polynesian Society

Waipapa Taumata Rau | The University of Auckland, New Zealand

SCHWARTZ, Jessica A.: *Radiation Sounds: Marshallese Music and Nuclear Silences*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2021. 312 pp., ack., biblio., illus., index, notes. US\$30.95 (softcover).

IRENE KARONGO HUNDLEBY

Lau-Mbaelelea, Solomon Islands

Independent Researcher

On 1 March 1954, the unfathomable occurred in the pristine atolls of the Marshall Islands. A nuclear bomb—over one thousand times the size of the Hiroshima atom bomb—smashed the coral forms beneath the sea, lit the sky on fire and filled the Marshallese atmosphere with irradiated poisonous dust that blanketed the islands and their people. *Radiation Sounds: Marshallese Music and Nuclear Silences* (2021) begins with descriptive accounts of the horrors experienced by the Marshallese people following the detonation of Castle Bravo (pp. 1–2). Details of the 67 explosions they endured between 1946 and 1958 and the ongoing physical, psychological and cultural repercussions are sobering. Jessica A. Schwartz's introduction lays bare these historical events, examines the diversity in attitudes and offers insight into complex polarities in thinking and being: we are introduced to the victor and the victim. Schwartz invites us into local Marshallese epistemology via the lyrics and stories of their suffering. As the injustices amass, we are left with a greater sense of the overbearing neocolonial stance and political hunger for power that drove the USA through the Cold War. Schwartz unravels Marshallese song testimony to show how the USA's refusal to acknowledge, compensate appropriately and be transparent with data continues to violate.

Radiation Sounds explores nuclear silences and Marshallese sounds through the Atomic Era. This work is the culmination of ethnographic fieldwork that Schwartz, a US American researcher, conducted in the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) from 2008 to 2010 (p. 3). This text is ambitious and delivers fresh narratives and previously undocumented Indigenous perspectives with an emphasis on singing practices, composition and performance. In addition to her observations, Schwartz includes comprehensive theoretical discussion on topics such as sonic politics, Indigenous Marshallese concepts and the subversive effect of militarism on matrilineal customs (pp. 30–40). Marshallese people generously offer the reader access to their experiences over 75 years of US militarism, coerced evacuations and relocations, irreversible diseases and medical testing. These stories are emotively expressed and archived through Marshallese music. Each song has been created to document, protest or preserve ancestral culture, memories, events and (in)action.

It is a testament to Schwartz's own ethical stance that Indigenous Bikinians and Rongelapese have chosen to share with her the concepts and details

behind their lyrics and testimonies (chapters 2 and 3). Schwartz draws attention to how Marshallese have “suffered for science” through testing, medical procedures and biomedical research (pp. 9, 205). Research involving the social sciences and environmental sciences has been no exception. Throughout *Radiation Sounds*, there is a common weft: Marshallese asking, singing, pleading for respect. A couple of months after Schwartz began her fieldwork, Rongelapese women stated she was the first researcher (over decades) to have ever consulted with them using a human subject consent form. This is a stark reminder to researchers to resist complacency in ethical process and to consider the “material-discursive chain” in which disciplines sit (pp. 205–6). Present-day Marshallese are still actively petitioning the USA to provide access to information about their medical cases, be transparent about the experiments to which they were subjected and acknowledge the ill advice, pressure and harm caused intergenerationally. Schwartz untangles US government agreements and actions that have occurred in the name of national security and in the guise of creating and protecting “global harmony” (pp. 9–10, 38–40, 44–47, 125–26). She also brings attention to how the USA has justified its geopolitical acquisitions and upheld secrecy in the pursuit of security—to the detriment of the Marshallese people (pp. 20–23). Aside from the issues of data sovereignty and declassification, dehumanisation adds a layer of emotional toxicity. She describes a 1957 newsreel where seven Marshallese men visit Argonne National Laboratory in Chicago for radiation and biomedical testing. John Anjain, the magistrate of Rongelap Atoll and a Marshallese leader, is openly referred to as a “happy, amenable savage”, and members of the collective group are also observed as “savages” (Pilger 2016: timestamp 0:28). This example of “polite” discrimination reveals how Marshallese have been cast as second-class citizens (pp. 70–74). While this attitude may not be entirely surprising to Indigenous people in the Pacific—myself included—dehumanisation is the foundation for all of the above human rights breaches. Schwartz distances herself from these attitudes and clearly states that one objective of *Radiation Sounds* is to move towards narratives that centre Indigenous Marshallese experiences (pp. 20, 69, 121). She examines their musical forms to purposefully break “the totalizing narratives of postwar living or overcoming that is endemic to the Enlightenment historical narrative” (p. 20). The Marshallese testimonies shared in *Radiation Sounds* counter the popularised bomb narratives that have previously censored them.

Marshallese music, sounds and silences communicate dislocation, brokenness and physical disturbances that echo the intense pain of their experiences. Many Marshallese have lived short lives in irradiated bodies riddled with cancer and thyroid diseases, while bereft of quality treatment. Schwartz describes onomatopoeic Marshallese language that reiterates and

reverberates to acutely deliver these messages (pp. 26–27, 50, 142). She explains the significance of the throat in Marshallese culture, considered the “center or seat of the soul”, the equivalent of the Western “heart,” to bring new cognisance (pp. 28–29). I am struck by the potency and power of the Marshallese voice, particularly techniques of sung/performed protest that include unconventional use of register (p. 142), defiant parading of thyroid scars (p. 125) and vulnerability presented through compromised broken voices (pp. 88, 93–95, 102). These accounts of activism¹ have been created to awaken people, especially those in power, to the effects of radiation, nuclear fallout and displacement.

The Bikinians, Rongelapese and other Marshallese are dislocated from their ancestral homelands. Consequently, they have experienced decades of cultural adjustment and change. There are new generations that have never set foot on their homeland atolls, and displacement has taken a toll on customs and traditions. Schwartz cites an example told to her by Lijon MacDonald, a prolific Rongelapese singer-songwriter (pp. 114). As a young person Lijon grew up learning ancestral chants, familial stories and knowledge from her elders (Schwartz 2012: 2–4). She shared with Schwartz how her people used a specific chant when they travelled between the islands of Ailinginae and Rongelap on journeys to gather food. While their schooner battled in the huge waves, this song would give them strength and guide them. In 2009, Lijon stated that her people no longer sang this song, as they no longer travelled across that stretch of water to their irradiated atoll. Similarly, the traditional matrilineal roles of women have markedly changed over time due to the introduction of non-Marshallese thinking. Schwartz discusses in detail the extent of matrilineal disenvoicing and silencing of feminine voices and the subsequent uprising of women through protest (pp. 50–52, 55–56, 83–98). Another notable change has emerged in recent years, as new Indigenous Bikinian campaigns focus on promoting hope and uplifting traditions and culture. Peterson Jibas refers to this as the consolidation of three aspects, “government, church and *mantin majel* (Marshallese custom)”, where music is the connecting thread that is weaving culture back into their lives (p. 189).

Radiation Sounds is a demanding read that is visceral, cerebral and one that challenges official narratives. As a text, it is dense and poses numerous concepts and is appropriate for an academic interdisciplinary audience, including those studying and working in anthropology, history, environmental studies, Pacific studies, politics and ethnomusicology. I would be delighted to see Schwartz make this information accessible to Indigenous Pacific audiences, for many Pacific people have experienced neocolonialism and militarisation and have actively protested for Pacific nuclear freedoms and on behalf of their brothers and sisters in the Marshall Islands and French

Polynesia. Perhaps this book will also encourage Indigenous Marshallese researchers to document their own stories in the future. Certainly, all people would benefit from these fundamental human rights lessons. The songs and stories are significant and powerful, and the critical notions therein demand to be common knowledge.

Note

1. “Artivism” is a portmanteau word combining “art” and “activism”. Artists use their artforms as a way to communicate injustice or to educate and increase awareness. The goal is to fight for social change and motivate people towards change.

References Cited

- Pilger, John, 2016. *The Coming War on China*. Documentary film. Chapter 1 (“The Secret of the Marshall Islands”), posted on YouTube on 27 November 2020 as “Dishonored Trust—Marshall Islands” by user Film for Justice, 28:00.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h1qjlCAE_DM
- Schwartz, Jessica A., 2012. A “voice to sing”: Rongelapese musical activism and the production of nuclear knowledge. *Music & Politics* 6 (1): 1–20.
<https://doi.org/10.3998/mp.9460447.0006.101>

<https://doi.org/10.15286/jps.133.1.120-123>

Exhibition Review

To Move Between: Healing and Resistance. Alanis Obomsawin, Artspace Aotearoa, 2 Sept.–4 Nov. 2023, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand.

ALEXANDRIA HAWLEY

Diné

Waipapa Taumata Rau | The University of Auckland

Film plays an important role in Indigenous activism and representation, with an increasing number of directors and producers sharing stories from their own perspective as First Nations and Native American people. The growth in the North American film industry and increasing inclusion of Indigenous voices is thanks to Alanis Obomsawin’s (Abenaki Nation) nearly 60-year career with the National Film Board of Canada. Artspace Aotearoa, a contemporary artist-led gallery, presents their annual programming in response to a question that guides their curatorial practice throughout a given year. In 2023, they asked, “Where does my body belong?” While the curatorial shows each answer this question distinctly, they also provide gallery visitors with a string of ongoing conversations, contributing to layered understandings of place and belonging.