

# WAVES OF DISPLACEMENT AND WAVES OF DEVELOPMENT

## Marshallese Songfest competitions and cultural diplomacy in Springdale, Arkansas

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**ABSTRACT:** This article explores Marshallese cultural diplomacy, particularly songfest competitions known as ‘The Battle of the Jepta,’ from 2013 to 2016 in Springdale, Arkansas (USA). I focus on the role of these songfest competitions as records of the relationship between the US and the Republic of the Marshall Islands, autonomous from the US since 1986 with the Compact of Free Association. Studying Marshallese cultural outreach that is realised through transpacific flows helps decentre US continental colonialism that promotes Global North acquisitions by perpetuating liberal ideologies and myths of islands-as-isolates. Given the educational and economic impulses to out-migrate from the Marshall Islands, I contemplate the prospects of intercultural dialogue and non-hegemonic development through South-South Cooperation from a wave-based theoretical framework and posit its generative potential to create waves of development that can shift and mitigate the impact of waves of displacement.

**KEYWORDS:** Marshallese, songfest, *jepta*, cultural diplomacy, Springdale, Pacific, diaspora

### The Global South

This article explores Marshallese cultural diplomacy, particularly songfest competitions known as ‘The Battle of the Jepta,’ from 2013 to 2016 in Springdale, Arkansas. I focus on the role of these competitions as records of the relationship between the US and the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) (Figure 1). The US occupied the Marshall Islands in 1944, ousting Japanese occupation forces, and remained after the War concluded, using the islands as a nuclear testing ground between 1946 and 1958. The RMI gained autonomy from the US in 1986 through the Compact of Free Association (COFA). This military, economic, and political agreement grants Marshallese citizens the ability to move “freely” between the US and RMI, as well as work, live, and attend school without a special visa in exchange for US access to Marshallese citizens for their labour both in military enlistment and, often, in minimum and low-wage employment positions, such as factory production work. Outmigration patterns from the RMI to the US place about one-third of the Marshallese population outside the RMI and around one-sixth in the land-locked state of Arkansas, many working in poultry plants run by multinational corporations, like Tyson Foods, which is headquartered in Springdale (Figure 2). Studying Marshallese cultural outreach that is



Figure 1 - The Marshall Islands' location in the north-western Pacific (with the west coast of North America at top right fringe of the globe (Wikicommons map).

realised through transpacific flows and intersectional communality helps decentre US continental colonialism, which has used geo-politically divisive policies to make margins of the archipelagic Americas (its island territories, commonwealths, isthmuses, and atolls) in order to put them in the service of the continental cosmopolitan centres and to promote Global North acquisitions by perpetuating divisive, liberal ideologies and myths of islands-as-isolates. Marshallese songfest competition concerts that ran from 2013-16 served as cultural diplomacy in the customarily conservative state of Arkansas and are important documents of how musical performance can contest the imaginary of islands-as-isolates through community building. Similarly, they can be perceived as vital in the production of decolonial knowledge that helps refuse the divisive policies of isolationism from an atoll-based perspective in which the intersections of ocean, dry land and sky are significant for their pivotal, relational and dynamic value. Given the educational and economic impulses to out-migrate, I contemplate the prospects of intercultural dialogue that can potentially excite conversations on non-hegemonic development through South-South cooperation (SSC) from a wave-based theoretical framework and posit its generative potential to create waves of development that can possibly shift and mitigate the impact of waves of displacement.

RMI musical diplomatic gestures can be read as complexly layered critiques that demand a more flexible, fluid appreciation of the COFA, which has been used to fix nuclear compensation and deny Marshallese rights to safety, security, and self-determination by cohering the nation-state while faced with extant litigation by individual atoll polities that had been irradiated. The COFA supports migratory flows from the made marginal, underdeveloped RMI nation-state in which the US military is the second largest employer.

Marshallese out-migrate from the RMI at increasing rates, with more than one third of Marshallese citizens (approximately 22,000 people) living abroad, nearly half of whom reside in Springdale, Arkansas (Figure 2). The latter is significant as an inter-regional assemblage of aspects of working class culture associated with the US South (eg country music), the Midwest (eg the “heartland” of manufacturing and agricultural production), Native American territorial border-sharing (eg the Cherokee nation and Osage nation in Oklahoma), American entrepreneurial urbanity (with industry start-ups such as Wal-Mart, Tyson Foods, Simmons Foods, and J.B. Hunt that became multi-national corporations being based in the area) and politicised minority groups that have organised into non-profits and cooperatives and have developed platforms that connect them in shows of solidarity. The Northwest Arkansas Council cites business and diversity as two of the reasons that the municipality was ranked in the top five places in the US to live in 2017 (North West Arkansas Council, 2017: online).



Figure 2 – Map of Arkansas and surrounding states (Springdale at top left of state) (courtesy of National Geographic Education)

Historical forgetting of the interconnectedness of islands must be read as a political issue and one that is intimately tethered to international relations that denigrate some historical connections, identities, and possibilities of communing. As Roberts and Stevens characterised, referring to Stratford’s chapter ‘Imagining the Archipelago,’ in their 2017 edited anthology *Archipelagic American Studies*, it is valuable to perceive “the United States as an archipelago to unsettle overpowering discourses of continentalism and give shape to other and different ontologies, epistemes, and values” (2017: 2).

This archipelagic imaginary of the Americas attends to the ritualised encroachment, territorialisation and expropriative accumulations of the continental United States such that it engulfs islands, isthmuses, straits and the non-continental in ways that mine their resources for the purposes of the continent. This problem of globalising the archipelagic as “South” in the service of the privileged continental cosmopolitanism that is the “Global North” must be addressed since, all too often, marginalised communities within continental

urban spheres of influence are colonised in contrast-making optics that extend to global flows. The boundaries of the forty-eight continental states reproduce waves of displacements from the archipelagic Americas in ways that sustain economic disparities. In other words, I am suggesting that socio-political disparities are produced precisely through the territorialisation of archipelagic movements in ways that extend and expand US settler colonialism. When disjoined from the larger picture of globalising flows, such colonial projects look very different, and, indeed, have uniquely nuanced modalities of historical claim and political investitures (Goldstein [ed], 2014). Attention to the forms and formations apparent in Marshallese cultural diplomacy bring attention to aquaformations and how communities design their creative endeavours and possibilities for communication through these “watery” bodies.

Northwest Arkansas is part of the networked history of Marshallese-US relations. Musical analysis of “waves” implies vibrations that connect and resonances that project spatio-temporal configurations that are alternate to the chronological, linear models of modernity. Ingersoll (2016) develops the concept of “seascape epistemology” to share how the oceanic fluidity and connectivity is a powerful organising force in indigenous knowledge that helps counter colonisation and disqualifications based on dismissive categorisations. Ingersoll, along with others such as Hau’ofa (2000), DeLoughrey (2007), Camacho (2010) and Clifford (2013), helps us think about the ways in which the indigenous and their communities (who have been reduced to land-based erasures and violent policies of cartographic enclosure and separation) make claims to space, which is connective – oceanic and mobile, against the “currents of militarisation” that impede them. I characterise these forms and formations as continuing (dual or multi-sided) conversations about the possibilities of (inter)cultural diplomacy and developmental dialogue in order to further discussion about the cooperative projects that can arise from these events – rather than well-worn notions of “aid” (salvation) or “entertainment” (trivia).

### *Jipikra* (Waves Slapping Together)

According to the Institute for Cultural Diplomacy (ICD):

*Cultural Diplomacy may best be described as a course of actions, which are based on and utilise the exchange of ideas, values, traditions and other aspects of culture or identity, whether to strengthen relationships, enhance socio-cultural cooperation, promote national interests and beyond; Cultural diplomacy can be practiced by either the public sector, private sector or civil society.* (nd: online)

The ICD also addresses how cultural diplomacy, which they suggest is a necessary complement to economic and political diplomacy, can shift “global public opinion” (ibid). The question of “the global” is important to this article because I am interested in the transpacific educational aspect of the *jepta* competition that is foundational to the actual event. In this way, I find that the *jepta* competition, as a form of cultural diplomacy, triangulates three distinct regions of the Global South that all have different levels of privilege, cultural know-how and skills, and material resources. The Global North and Global South are more complex than the binaries yet it is without argument that there are particular ways of extractive doing in the neocolonial and multinational corporate networked world that is the Global North, which imposes development models on the Global South in ways that exacerbate disadvantaged groups’ mobility by creating zones of

epistemic deprivation and dependency. In 'The US South in Global Context: A Collection of Position Statements' (2006), McKee and Trefzer introduce their edited collection as a provocation to the ideological fatigue of "patriarchal whiteness and rural idyll" that "is more concerned with understanding the US South as 'thick' with border-crossings of every sort: racial, gendered, regional, transnational" (691). Such work gestures to "a new Southern studies" that shifts the conversation from the "tensions between the national and the regional into one increasingly characterised by the tension between the local and the global" (ibid). This tension can be heard in the sonorous movements of Marshallese bodies that connect lived histories.

While this article does not propose development models, I do suggest that cultural diplomacy, as an educational practice through which intercultural dialogue is historicised, has the potential to reconfigure how people engage in and address underdevelopment from a perspective that challenges continental bias and, with it, notions of (industrial, technoscientific) fixity. I believe that cultural diplomacy has the potential to expand imaginations concerning what type of communities, arrangements of bodies and values are possible across varied environments. Rather than essentialising Marshallese culture, however, cultural diplomacy needs to be read as politics; for it shifts the terrain of what can be seen, heard, and imagined. Taking cultural diplomacy as politics, I develop a theoretical framework based on the *jepta* or songfest event and preparations in transpacific capacity. In doing so, a cultural interchange route I call the "aquapelagic South" emerges based on what Hayward terms the "aquapelago."

Hayward explains that the term "aquapelago" "was coined in contradistinction to the established term "archipelago" to refer to the integrated marine and terrestrial assemblages that are generated by human habitation and activity in island locales" (2015: 114). Treating "assemblages" as "social units," he writes that "aquapelagic assemblages" are historically situated "performed entities" particular to marine-terrestrial interactions and that "aquapelago are assemblages that come into being and wax and wane as climate patterns alter and as human socio-economic organisations, technologies, and/or the resources and trade systems they rely on, change and develop in these contexts" (2012: 7). This integrated assemblage provides the potential for thinking about Anthropocene epochal issues of climate change, global warming and, also, the welfare of humans and other animals, plant-life, and the living landscapes. Yet, underlying the practices of these marine-terrestrial exchanges are the peoples who have learned to, over time, invest in particular ways of being, doing, and making. In other words, their cultures are particular to their needs and comforts. Still, the organisational designs can offer innovative ways to develop such locales in networked formation with other locales with diasporic islander communities as well as non-islander communities. Expropriation, appropriation and theft are key issues. Documentation of cultural diplomacy and studies of cultural diplomacy might prove insightful into claims to theft and profit that have not been heard in courts. By covering up exchange, the Global North can claim invention.

Marshallese transpacific musical movements constitute what can be considered as a manifestation of the "aquapelagic South" (Hayward, 2015). The Marshallese atoll networked imaginary or, in their terms, *aelōñ* (a word that refers to the movements and circulations of currents in the ocean and sky and across terrestrial "dry" land) shapes how they have organised historically and learned to navigate and move through the world. Their navigational activities – in terms of oceanic navigation and other movements that emphasise directedness—are shaped by notions of historical progress as linear development, yet, the aquapelagic perspective shares a non-linearity, a tide table of ebbs and flows, a night sky

with constellations that move through the year, and seasonal markers as well as ways of recording history. Marshallese aquapelagic movements archive attentions and relations to the *aelōñ* (atollscape) (Dvorak, 2018) – the aqua-forms (ocean, lagoon), sky, and dry land that are also the “building blocks of the language,” according to elder Willie Mwekto (Jetnil-Kijiner, 2014). Although the Marshallese language is not considered to be “endangered,” Marshallese youth in mainland US are encouraged by their communities to learn and share the language that moves through their bodies and resounds the presence of the ancestors in middle America through choreographic motions – dances, sonorities, and other patterned shapes of bodies in Marshallese musical outreach. This outreach, then, is not of a community disappearing or being lost, in the manner in which crisis-laden news presents stories of US neocolonial dominance and displacements. “Climate change refugees” have become the new “nuclear exiles” in the press, even though most Marshallese out-migrated for economic, educational, and health reasons. It is a musicality of resource, human energy, political possibility, and cultural encounter that sounds like the meeting of waves that intersect as what Marshallese term *jipikra*, referring to waves that slap against each other and create new patterns from their engagements. Rather than impede each other’s movements so one dominates and one disappears, a tipped meeting point, and then a new configuration, of oceanic sociality emerges; a third space that does not become fixed but ripples and resonates in multidirectional becoming. Rather than fix the Marshallese songfest by trying to analyse “meaning,” I aim to think through the values and communicative potentialities through which alternative sites for convivial research and SSC developments can accrue momentum in shaping global flows.

With *jipikra* in mind, I preface Marshallese songfest competitions by situating my thoughts concerning the aquapelagic South (as SSC) by considering Springdale’s Marshallese radio station, which is an important means of transpacific dissemination and communication. In August 2015, the radio station KMRW 98.9 FM commenced broadcasting. The station was founded, funded, and managed by Marshallese music enthusiast Larry Muller, who trained as a sailor and was employed as a captain while he was in the RMI. As Eidsheim has explored in experimental aquatic musical performances, the material dimensions of music are important when considering listening, voicing, singing, and speaking not through “the figure of sound” but rather as “intermaterial vibrational practice” (2015: 169-178). Intermaterial vibrational practice contemplates the “performed entities” or “aquapelagic assemblages” that might be particular to the marine-terrestrial interactions but can also shape land-locked regions, thus creating the potential for new subjectivities and patterns of movement. KMWR can be understood as a node in Marshallese development in the middle of the US. It grew out of necessity; Marshallese were calling Muller from the Marshall Islands with special requests and telling him that the RMI government’s radio station V7AB’s transmitter rusted and fell into the water and that the station was broadcasting over an FM frequency from the airport, meaning that parts of Majuro Atoll and the outer islands could not listen. Radio is a primary means of communication and connection in the RMI, and it has been increasingly so since the 1950s when the US sought to develop the Marshall Islands while undercutting developments through nuclear militarism. The radio is a repurposed part of this period of (under)development and Marshallese have used it as a site of interconnection and survival. Radio functions in terms of communication that also guides movements; oceanic navigational practices functioned both as communication and transport, and the radio has become a means of navigating waves, connecting persons displaced and networking development.

Muller avoids the symbol of the conical speaker and instead uses aquapelagic motifs of the interlocking marine and terrestrial to symbolise sound dispersion: symbols of

interconnected oceanic waves, airwaves, and currents. This situates the ‘Sounds of the Islands,’ in terms of the atoll building-blocks of the language, the movements, and the meaningful articulations of language to movements through other expressive dimensions. The representational aspect of the aquatic environment (that is constitutive of the aquapelago culture) is significant because it avoids the representational schema that often associate the radio as a means of disembodiment or transcendence of time, space, or place and of identity. Such representations are tied to the “figure of sound” and liberal ideologies that position the listening subject alone in a world of sounds rather than a participant in her environment. Figure 3 is an advertisement for KMRW, 98.9 FM, ‘Sounds of the Islands’, and it continues the vein of cultural expressions that position aquatic bodies as the living bodies they are, central to and the literal backing of Marshallese communicative potentialities in all life, from the land, trees, and other humans. It is the body of water that stretches out beyond the borders of the picture, showing the limits of the frame and possibly the connections with the diasporic community, networked by the waves in transpacific oceanic fashion. Returning to Arkansas, Marshallese often refer to the Ozarks as the mountains and, while this picture is not necessarily a representation of the Ozark Plateau, it speaks to the imaginary of Marshallese material possibilities, especially since the near sea-level atolls are becoming threatened by anthropogenic climate change. To situate musical and cultural outreach as springing from the aquatic body involves us remembering that bodies that have been shaped by aquaforms, and that these bodies have shaped the music that connects and contours in a feedback loop of *jipikra* as intermaterial vibrational practice.



Figure 3 - Henson Abon and Michael Capelle of KMRW 98.9 FM

The advertisement, importantly, is an embodiment, through the interconnected bodies, of Marshallese and American value systems that creates a concentric circle of sorts with Marshallese acoustemological orientations, stemming from the watery body, at the centre. The elder, Henson Abon, a veteran broadcaster from V7AB in Majuro, wears a nautical themed button-up shirt. He covers an image of a palm tree that serves as background to the microphone that disperses sound outwards of the bounds of the FM frequency strength and broadcast area. The images float on the water and Michael Capelle is kept warm by fabric patterned with images of American currency. He gives the Hawaiian “hang loose” sign, recalling the larger Pacific diaspora, of which his generation was part of, in terms of the decolonisation movements and pan-Pacific, and ultimately pan-Pacific and Caribbean,

modes of cultural and regional belonging, which became increasingly reflected in Marshallese music. The picture of material abundance that is represented in this image is resounded in the continuous stream, the flow, of music back to the RMI, forming imaginaries about life in diaspora and beginning a conversation about development prospects in and for the aquapelagic South.

### The Battle of the *Jepta*

Springdale's RMI Consul General Carmen Chong Gum, whose term ended in 2017, believed strongly in the possibilities of cultural diplomacy, inspired by Hawai'i's Merry Monarch Festival. I first met Chong Gum in 2011 when, after returning from fieldwork in the RMI (2008-2010), I decided to visit the diasporic Marshallese community located in Springdale that I had heard about from so many of my interlocutors. During this visit over the holiday break, I met with her at the RMI Consulate, which had been established in Springdale while I was in the RMI, generating much news and discussion among the residents of the atoll nation. Chong Gum and I continued our conversations over the next year and a half, as I increasingly made more trips from New York City to Northwest Arkansas. She asked me whether I thought Americans would be interested in *Kūrijmōj* (Marshallese Christmas) festivities, like the *jepta*. I agreed with Chong Gum's reasoning that *Kūrijmōj* would be interesting to Americans because it conveyed distinct cultural approaches to shared values through which the missionary-colonial culture was produced and I suggested that the Gospel Day productions were also relevant to intercultural collaborations. Gospel Day is during the *Kūrijmōj* season and celebrates the coming of the American Board of Commissioners of Foreign Missions (ABCFM) from Boston in 1857. It is a celebration of encounter and of the cessation of chiefly violence, per the narrative that enables the present-day relationship between Americans and Marshallese, which is not the same, in Marshallese minds, as the relationships between the national governments.

While Gospel Day is an event that is recognised in continental USA, *Kūrijmōj* is a process of reconfiguring community that is reinforced and showcased through the *jepta*. It was clear that Chong Gum felt strongly about the potential of the *jepta* to enhance communality, reinvention, and American-Marshallese connections. Her project was an ambitious rerouting of the imagination of islands-as-isolates across inter-cultural levels, meaning the ways of doing, making, teaching, sharing and relating within a community or group of people. In this instance, the group of people had been nationalised into "Americans" and "Marshallese," and while the groups had developed unique cultures, neocolonial historical amnesia had perpetuated the colonial myth of otherness, rendering the formative connections between them all but silenced.

A major part of their erasure was the lack of opportunities for educational and economic empowerment. The songfest competition was intended to raise scholarship money for Springdale Marshallese graduating seniors to assist with college expenses. Money raised from the event would be awarded to student applicants on a competitive basis and dependent upon the proceeds collected. Additionally, winners would be selected from among the contestants based on how effectively they performed Marshallese values through song and dance. An important aspect of *Kūrijmōj* is that it is a time when the community still comes together to gather and circulate resources in a celebration of their togetherness; the *jepta* became a symbol of this meaningful activity situated in a region in middle America that draws its culture from the Midwest and South. *Kūrijmōj* is also a time for renewal and an awakening of the senses. In addition to straddling multiple transnational cultural



connections, the songs and dances within the *jepta* layer community-building as historical processes of interconnections between humans and non-humans and between cultural groups. *Jepta* are choreographies of community, which are particularly important in the Marshallese diaspora at this historical moment when outmigration from the Pacific archipelago to middle America is continuing to increase. Similarly, as many Marshallese lament, their youth are inundated with a US culture that has, as its foundations, a settler colonial mentality that is valorised in educational programming and popular cultural materials. Marshallese cultural diplomacy is crucial to outreach and also for young Marshallese to learn about themselves and their cultural ties; their performances showcase Marshallese cultural modes of community building and can actualise possibilities for belonging in the diaspora.

The *jepta* can be considered a “material entanglement” (Thomas, 1991) that indicates Pacific presence amidst historical encounters with settler colonial societies that have aimed to erase Pacific culture or exploit it for imperial gain. For Chong Gum and many Marshallese participants, the *jepta* event, which usually takes place in December but was scheduled in Springdale in May to coincide with the end of the school year and Marshallese Constitution Day (making its political intent more forward), was community building because it put into motion the strands of community formation in a transnational capacity. Marshallese songfest groups in Arkansas learned from songfest groups in the Marshall Islands, who, my interlocutors explained, knew much more about the Marshall Islands and thus about the performer movements and songs – thereby sharing the indigenous mindset and cultural orientation of the groups. Living on the atolls, on one’s land, enables a more thorough knowledge of the expressions of the land, which is the basis of social organisation, in songs and dances that take on the movements of the land (re-sounded and gestured by humans). The Marshallese groups living in Arkansas also orchestrated their own music and dance to incorporate their connections with the country, in Arkansas. But, much like they took a decidedly *aelōñ* (not-island-as-isolate) approach to sounding their islands, they also took a decidedly interconnected approach with sounding the country through the islands. And, this interconnected approach demands an understanding of the historical connections between Marshallese and mainland US society.

In 1857, missionaries with the ABCFM, whom Marshallese called *ri-pälle* (originally for clothed, now white, Americans), slowly began to spread the Gospel throughout the Marshall Islands. They greatly impacted Marshallese culture, actively discouraging customary dances, music, clothing and indigenous worship practices that have subsequently either been combined with Christian traditions or else displaced by them. *Kūrijmōj* is, as Carucci (1997) writes in *Nuclear Nativity: Rituals of Renewal and Empowerment in the Marshall Islands* (1997), an entire festive season that includes Christmas Day (for which it is named) in the span from late September or early October through mid-January. *Kūrijmōj* is a time for “giving-while-keeping,” love, kindness and celebrating the figure of Christ, who the Marshallese god-chief Jebro (known for caring for his mother) has been folded into, as a benevolent leader through activities that maintain communal bonds. Carucci, who details *Kūrijmōj* activities and cultural symbolism, notes that the celebration begins “with the formation of *jepta*, the members of which design songs and dances” (1997: 20). These songs and dances, which I detail below with specific examples, emerged after World War II and the movements have specific names, such as *maaj* (march) and *piit* (beat) (ibid: 23).

In 1944, the US military “liberated” the Marshall Islands from Japanese Imperial occupation. Scholars and younger Marshallese alike who view the US’s subsequent treatment of the atolls and their persons to be less than kind, and even abusive, contest the notion of

liberation. Marshallese culture values working together and cooperation over an individualistic concept of liberty that is aligned in the West with liberal humanism and activated through capitalist exploitation and accruals. *Jepta* songfest competitions operate in this context and reroute the conspicuous consumption introduced by Americans by throwing candy and other “riches” at the audience during performances. Decades of US militarism, nuclear testing and the George W. Bush Administration’s 2004 dismissal of the Changed Circumstances Petition (CCP) under the Compact of Free Association (COFA),<sup>1</sup> which detailed new evidence of nuclear consequences that had emerged after the US initial payment for damages (Johnston and Barker, 2008: 243-244) have left many Marshallese struggling to make sense of their so-called “special relationship” with the world power. The COFA – which was amended and signed between the sovereign states without acknowledgement of the CCP in 2003 – enables Marshallese to live, work, and travel in the US without restrictions like obtaining a special visa or work permit. Marshallese do not have to become permanent residents or naturalised US citizens and they are not considered immigrants. As a result of colonial and imperial practices of forced or incentivised relocations for work and wars over the last 150 years, most of the Marshallese in the external diaspora, live in the United States.

A majority of Marshallese people in the external diaspora either live in or frequently travel to Springdale, which is now home to approximately 8,000-10,000 Marshallese.<sup>2</sup> The municipality is nestled in the northwest corner of the landlocked state near the college town of Fayetteville (University of Arkansas) and Bentonville, which is home to Walmart and Northwest Arkansas Community College. The municipality also hosts the RMI Consulate and an office annex of the Kili/Bikini/Ejit (KBE) local government.<sup>3</sup> The tests conducted on Bikini and Enewetak atolls have created irrevocable changes in Marshallese lifeways. Anthropogenic climate change has also created concern and what some see as untenable living conditions. Many Marshallese choose to come to the US for employment, educational and healthcare opportunities and now, with such a large population residing in the Midwest, to be with their families.<sup>4</sup> Springdale also hosts two non-profit organisations dedicated to Marshallese issues, intercultural connections and dialogue, the Marshallese Educational Initiative (MEI) and the Arkansas Coalition of Marshallese (ACOM).

Battle of the *Jepta* competitions held in Springdale in 2013-2016 were a part of the community’s cultural diplomacy but it is important to situate them within the idea of the interconnectedness that comes from the land, which Marshallese consider particularly important in the US. The word *jepta* itself is a Marshallese pronunciation of the word chapter, referring to chapters of the Bible. It is likely that an early version of the modern

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<sup>1</sup> The COFA was the agreement between the newly formed Republic of the Marshall Islands (1979) and the United States governments that detailed future relations between the two nations, including nuclear compensation, which went into effect in 1986. Section 177 of the original COFA details the right of the RMI to submit the CCP if circumstances warrant, which the Marshallese government submitted in 2000. See the US Department of State (2004).

<sup>2</sup> The US Census Bureau (2011-2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates) places the number of Pacific Islanders in Springdale at 4,950 based on 2015 estimates. However, this number is widely believed to be underestimated. According to the Springdale School District, approximately 3,000 Marshallese students were enrolled in autumn 2017, which was up from 2,400 in autumn 2015. The nonprofit Marshallese Educational Initiative estimates the number of Marshallese in Springdale as between 8,000-10,000.

<sup>3</sup> Whose central office is in Majuro Atoll, the capital of the RMI, because the Bikinians remain exiled from their land due to US nuclear weapons testing.

<sup>4</sup> For more information on the Marshallese diaspora in Springdale, see Schwartz (2015: 781-812).

*jepta* performance with singing and dancing began during the *Kūrijmōj* in the late 19th Century (see Carucci, 1997 and Schwartz, forthcoming). Today, these songfest competitions occur between clan or atoll identities, or church congregation groups (usually made up of teenagers and young adults), along with ceremonies that include gift-giving and exchange to ensure regeneration and renewal, and thus blend Christian concepts with traditional feasting practices. In Springdale, the *jepta* groups are exclusively from churches, which often include parishioners from different atolls. The participants wear uniforms, usually matching island shirts and muumuus. Separated by gender, the group files out in a militaristic type march, while the dance leader blows a whistle to coordinate movements. Singers, accompanied by a Yamaha keyboard, provide the music for the beat dance (*piit*) and, in some instances, engage in call and responses with the dancers. Each dance tells a story as its participants enact movements associated with everyday tasks, such as building a house or a canoe, or more ethereal movements, like mimicking a bird in flight. These everyday activities speak to Marshallese customary culture, what they call *mantin majel*, which is predicated on group cooperation and respect of, primarily, chiefs, mothers, and elders.

A couple of schools in the Springdale School District have highlighted Marshallese culture, either through “culture night” types of events or in dance performances. Even though several Marshallese liaison officers are employed by the district, some have shared with me that they do not feel they have the agency to give advice or make suggestions to the teachers or administrators. One principal shared how her teachers do not give out homework during November and December, because they expect that their Marshallese students are out late in church practicing for Christmas festivities.<sup>5</sup> Absenteeism is a widespread problem with Marshallese students. Many parents who grew up in the Marshall Islands did not complete high school. The only high schools in RMI are on Majuro, where the capital is located, Jaluit and, most recently, Wotje Atolls. The other atolls provide instruction through the eighth grade, but books and supplies (and at times, teachers) are limited and rules such as attendance, are in practice, somewhat flexible. Springdale school teachers know little about the history and culture of the islands and currently, there is only one Marshallese teacher, a basketball coach, who was recently hired. Alfred Capelle, the Chair of the Marshall Islands' Customary Law and Language Commission, and one of the authors of the Marshallese English Dictionary, and David Hough, a US professor on the Commission, visited Springdale in 2016 and left convinced that a charter school was the only option to ensure that Marshallese students were taught about island culture and history (p.c 31st July 2016).

Within the community, *Kūrijmōj* traditions are enthusiastically practiced. But even though Marshallese youth participate in *jepta* and are taught the dance movements and songs, many do not understand their meanings. Albious Latior, a community advocate whose brother directs one of the church groups, said that the youth in Springdale are often unfamiliar with the *jepta* dance moves and their cultural meanings. “They may know that they are building a canoe, or building a house, but that's all. They don't know what the steps are for” (p.c 7th September 2014). The youth in the Marshall Islands are more familiar with the moves, which often mimic traditional tasks carried out in the islands, and, according to Latior, “they come here and show them [ie Marshallese in Arkansas]... this is from the island, all the dance [moves] we are doing... they were the ones who showed us how to do the dance. (ibid)

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<sup>5</sup> Conversation between Benetick Maddison, L. Brown, and an elementary school principal in Springdale, Arkansas, May 2015, shared with the author.

To Lator, maintaining traditional movements and songs is vitally important. Chong Gum, however, sees cultural shifts as inevitable. To her, as long as “it’s sung in Marshallese” and “performed by Marshallese and composed by Marshallese,” incorporating local aspects of culture and everyday life in the lyrics, it is fine. She would prefer that groups use the ukulele rather than the keyboard, however, explaining that “That’s why [with] the choir... we don’t have them use the keyboard. They will just stand up and sing. With all the melodies, and tones, and mixed... I like that.” (p.c August 22, 2014). Chong Gum’s preferences are conceptually in line with those of Lator because both are showing how an attention to critical details of community building, whether in the islands or in rural USA, is important to being part of that community. In their original context, at least, the *jepta* also reminds its performers of the work that goes into community building, from the spotting and naming of fish, to catching them for food, to learning how to tie a knot so the canoe doesn’t float away and knowing which birds mark certain lands for navigation. The *jepta* are, thereby, Marshallese cooperative processes in which bodies move and interweave in song and dance, intersecting in *jipikra* formations.

On Friday 24th May 2013, the Springdale High School Bulldog Gym, for approximately five hours, felt like Christmas in the Marshall Islands. The sights, sounds, smells, and even the weather were reminiscent of the *jepta* events during *Kūrijmōj* in the RMI. The main differences were that programs were printed out (Figure 4) and there were judges—four US American educators (including the author) and four Marshallese, three of whom were elders—tasked with deciding on a winning team and were provided with a scorecard.

THE NATIONAL ANTHEM "FOREVER MARSHALL ISLANDS" (MUSIC AND LYRICS BY THE LATE PRESIDENT AMATA KABUA)

**MARSHALLESE**

AE-LON EO AO ION LO---ME-TO; EINWOT WUT KO LO-TI ION DREN E-LAE; KIN ME-RAM IN ME-KAR JEN IJO---I-LAN; ERREO AN ROMAK IOIR KIN ME---RAM---IN MOUR; ILTAN PEIN A---NIJ EWEL-EO---SIM WOJ; KE-JOLIT KIJ KIN IJIN JI-KIR E-MOL; IJJA-MIN I-LOK JEN IN AO-LE-MO RAN; ANIJ AN RO JE-MEM WO-NAK-KE IM KEJ RAM-MON AE-LIN KEIN AM.

**ENGLISH**

MY ISLAND LIES O'ER THE O-CEAN; LIKE A WREATH OF FLOWERS UPON THE SEA; WITH A LIGHT OF MEKAR FROM FAR A-BOVE; SHINING WITH THE BRILLIANCE OF RAYS OF LIFE;. OUR FA-THER'S WONDROUS CRE-A-TION; BE-QUEATHED TO US, OUR MOTHERLAND; I'LL NEVER LEAVE MY DEAR HOME SWEET HOME; GOD OF OUR FOREFATHERS PROTECT AND BLESS FOREVER MARSHALL ISLANDS.

**JUDGES**

Layne Bass —English Teacher/Islander Club & Marshallese Council Sponsor; Cindy Lenk—ESL Teacher Walker Elementary School; Marsha Layer—ESL Curriculum Specialist; Dr. Jessica Schwartz, PhD, Mellon Postdoctoral Teaching Fellow, Department of Music, Columbia University; Anita Tomeing-Iban, District Marshallese Community Liaison/Kōrā in Rikaki Anij Emman Assembly of God Church; Rikaki Johnny Lajie, Marshallese Pentecostal Church; Rikaki Billy Tatios, New Hope Marshallese Church; Deacon Noland Phillip, parent; Rikaki Tolanwut Lorennij, Lowell 1st Marshallese Assembly of God/Marshallese Elder; Saimon Milne, Elder/Brother Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints/Marshallese Elder; Rikaki Middle Ralpho, Yokwe an Jesus-Church

Figure 4 - 'Battle of Jepta Concert' 2013 Program, Front (left) and Back (right) of Cover

At the performance in Arkansas, the Full Gospel Church *jepta* performed ‘Jojo Lakilmaj’ (‘Black Flying Fish’), a song that accompanies the *piit* dance (Figures 5, 6). *Piit* showcases the performers in complex, interweaving lines of dancers of opposite gender. As Carucci identifies, they use “synchronic and harmonic movements” and while “the dancers do not touch, the *piit* uses diversified and animated movements, backwards and sideways as well as forward, to elaborate on the woven-line performance” (1997: 157). The choreographed interweaving highlights the underlying reproductive and ritualistic power of *Kūrijmōj* represented by the *jepta* (ibid). Cultural diplomacy can also be read in terms of ritualised reproduction and the continuation of Marshallese values and cultural practices that endure by transpacific engagement: Marshallese from the RMI teach Marshallese in the US, who teach non-Marshallese in the US intercultural community. Bond-making or social sustenance is marked in various ways. These, like the crest of *jipikra* or the radio station advertisement, involve the concentric resonating outward of different cultural signifiers grounded by Marshallese embodied movements. For example, ‘Jojo Lakilmaj’ includes a reference to country music with a nod to the rodeo movement of lassoing transformed from the fly-fishing movement and a “yee-haw” shout out from the crowd, whose energy is just as important in the performance.

The musical score is arranged in a multi-staff format. The staves from top to bottom are: Body Percussion (treble clef, whole notes), Whistle (treble clef, eighth notes), Drum Set (treble clef, eighth notes), Voice (treble clef, whole notes), Voice (treble clef, whole notes), Synth Bass (bass clef, whole notes), Synth Strings (treble clef, whole notes), and Dance (treble clef, eighth notes). The key signature has two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The Dance staff includes a box at the bottom right with the text: "Flying motions, alternating arms, on the notated beats."



Figure 5 - Opening of ‘Jojo Lakilmaj’ (Transcription by Adam Adhiyatma, 2013)

Section/ Time	Marshallese Lyrics	English Translation Summary (some literal approximations)	Movement (Dance)
I.	Ebwil im kurtak wa e waan Full Gospel re a ejojo tok	Full Gospel's boat is ready to set sail to catch black male flying fish	arms make a paddle motion on each side arms in the air like wings, make a flying motion
II.	Rebukbukoje bukoje, rebar buko je, buko je ee. Kotak nailon, rome kojroro imaan wa e	We tie and untie our lines, draw them tight and throw them to the front	rows face each other, bend down and with palms down make gesture like smoothing  motion with hands to one side, making a tying gesture, then raise right hand and make a lasso motion, boys facing rear, girls facing front
III.	Ewe noo ion wa e Ewe noo ion wa e rebukbukoje im kemoot rebukbukoje im kemoot in Ukrabel Katuke	Make preparations for the hauling in of our first catch	hands clap, bend over and with arms extended reach down and make a scooping motion, then right arm raises in lasso motion
IV.	Katakatake katuke kwo driboje im katoke inin ian rok rok in.	Waves come crashing, while we turn and untarn our nets, move them from left to right	girls and boys interweave, and with arms make shoveling gesture, return to original position and make lasso gesture
V.	Eketok jojo ne imaan, jojo ne imaan wa e. Eketok jojo ne imaan, jojo ne rejatin wa e. jojo ne rejatin wa e. jojo ne rejatin wa e. Initi im kotake im katuke inin ian rokrokin. Initi im kotake im katuke inin ian rokrokin.	Flying fish everywhere Flying fish everywhere, in front, on the side, while we haul in what we catch	boys and girls interweave with arms outstretched in flying motion  boys and girls face each other continuing the flying gesture, then turn outward and repeat  bend over and clap hands arms reach down and make a shoveling gesture, then turn and make lasso motion
VI.	Jojo lakilmaj Jojo lakilmaj Jojo lakilmaj rakjen maan kotoan wa e Jojo lakilmej Jojo lakilmej rakjen maan kutakin wa e	Black male flying fish Black male flying fish Black male flying fish move over, move away Black male flying fish Black male flying fish Black male flying fish Move over, move out of the way for the sail is set	arms raise in flying motion boys stomp their feet boys and girls interweave
VII.	Okbed, okbed toom kanne wa e Okbed, okbed toom kanne wa e	You'll be scooped up and brought aboard You'll be scooped up and brought aboard	arms reach down and make scooping gesture, then turn and raise arms and make gesture pushing outward

Figure 6 - Chart detail of *jepta* performance, 'Jojo lakilmej' ('Black flying fish'), with summary translation in English.

"Kūrijmōj not only seeks the renewal of life; simultaneously it is life in the process of its actualisation or becoming," Carucci explains (1997: 15). *Jepta* songfest competitions, like *Kūrijmōj*, are energetic manifestations of communality and inclusivity. They are spaces to energise cooperative renewal through an active reflection on what has held and continues to hold Marshallese society together (in relation to the movements of other cultural groups with whom Marshallese have collaborated – Americans, Japanese, Germans, Spanish, and

other discernable groups, such as American rural culture. The possibilities of further incorporation (as Marshallese society, like many Pacific societies, is customarily categorically inclusive), are thus invigorated. This is the foundation of cultural diplomacy and the choice of *jepta*. From the outset, the US military emphasised Christianity in their dealings with the Marshallese, particularly in appealing to the Bikinians in 1946 to surrender their atoll for nuclear testing for the (supposed) “good of mankind”. Protestant missionaries from Boston first introduced Christianity to the Marshallese a century earlier. US military personnel stationed in the Marshall Islands during the occupation, most likely from the southern United States, sang country-western music that played on military-controlled radio stations. Country music’s ties to Gospel music and its evocation of “God and country,” appealed to Marshallese moral sensibilities. They evoked traditional adherence to respect for elders and to sharing with and caring for community members, all of which are considered part of Marshallese culture and are situated squarely within the Christian schema of Biblical virtues.<sup>6</sup> Early country music, which evolved from the folk music of Appalachia and western ballads, was often high-pitched and sung with a nasal inflection, aesthetic attributes of performance that Marshallese could relate to (Fox, 2004; Hubbs, 2014). Marshallese embraced country music, or *al in kaubowe* (cowboy songs) as they knew it, because of its affective qualities and because of its sense of place.

Marshallese often stress the “feelings” behind country music and its use of emotion and songs of heartache and suffering are expressive qualities Marshallese embody in their own music making.<sup>7</sup> Marshallese also describe the music’s popularity within their community in terms of its “realness,” its personal, story-telling qualities of real life. Marshallese in Arkansas have shared that country music also represents place or, viewed in spatial terms, as being of or in the country. “You can see what country music is talking about,” Benetick Maddison explained (p.c 13th July 2015). “You drive down the road and you see it, country, fields, lakes. What they are singing about is real. It’s right there in front of you.” To many Marshallese, the country is “the land,” which is considered “the essence of life” (Johnston and Barker, 2008: 59). The respect for country music is one that in part comes from the felt ties to and through the land. There is a notable tension with respect to the waves of displacement from “the land” in transpacific context wrought by US settler colonialism, and *jepta* performances can bring these issues to the fore by unsettling settlers’ entitlements to proprietary rights and value judgments.

## On Judging

*Jepta* are judged in the Marshall Islands and the winning team often gets the adulation of other *jepta* teams and a monetary prize. The *jepta* are often judged by a *rikaki* (minister/preacher) who is the intermediary between the spiritual world (God/Anij) and the teams. The revered *rikaki* is often from outside the atoll community and he (mostly it is a

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<sup>6</sup> Marshallese adherence to Protestantism, especially in Arkansas—part of the Bible belt—is looked upon favorably by the region’s non-Marshallese population. Protestant churches in the area, as well as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and Jehovah’s Witness, regularly reach out to the Marshallese community in a continuation of their missionary zeal to convert or support their “brothers and sisters in Christ.” Gospel hymnals and the Bible, written by missionaries, were the first books written in the Marshallese language (albeit a phonetically Anglicised version of the language).

<sup>7</sup> The seat of emotion in Marshallese culture resides in the throat where sound emerges, rather than the heart like in western culture. It is rare to see Marshallese publically express emotion, but it is acceptable to do so in song through crying.

man with a wife who leads the women's church groups and activities) is therefore not part of one of the clans (or political divisions of land within the atoll). The word *rikaki* translates to "person who makes the musical key" or sets the spiritual, vocal, or emotional tone, which comes from the throat. The word *rikaki* is used for both preachers and teachers (the sacred teachings and secular teachings) that were once part of the same missionary boarding schools built in the 19th Century. Since *jepta* celebrations are supposed to stir the emotions it makes sense that the winning team is chosen by the *rikaki*. And, in the United States, in Arkansas, Chong Gum's decision to have an equal number of *ri-pälle* teachers and *ri-majöl* elders, ministers, and community leaders was equally sound and part of the *Kūrijmōj* inflected cultural diplomacy endeavour within the secular space of the Springdale High School gym.

Having worked on the early stages of the *jepta* planning with Chong Gum, in 2013, I was invited to be a judge. I sat in between the Marshallese and *ri-pälle* judges. Although I had about four years of studying Marshallese music (two of which were in the RMI) as my aural advantage, I still found it important to listen to the Marshallese elders based on the parameters we were given. Middle Ralpho, an elderly Marshallese judge, sat next to me and was visibly displeased with the marks I gave one of the teams. Ralpho referred to my "Singing Band (keyboard player and singers)" category and pointed out that I had given the team an 8.5 score (out of 10). My rationale, I expressed, was based on the muddled sound of the keyboard, which to my ears, made the entire performance (vocals and accompaniment) lack clarity and precision. Ralpho then disputed my assessment with the counter that he could hear the singer and that her voice, which he said was the most important part, was "clear" like a "bird." He also appreciated the overall presentation, which was another category on which we judged the *jepta* groups. Even though I understood that there could be political implications (he could have been in one of the churches or related to some of the performers), I felt his rationale persuasive and, as Marshallese cultural diplomacy, I felt the point was to learn about what respected Marshallese valued in these musical movements since too often American patterns become the norm of societal engagement. There is always debate over the judging, be it in the RMI or the US, and perhaps the debates serve as important cultural moments to negotiate and share in a space where such tensions are accounted for by the processes of the renewal assumed after the event (Schwartz, 2015).

In 2016, following the competition, the judges were taken to a room in the back of the gym. This was unlike 2013 where we handed in our scorecards to be totalled. Following deliberations that lasted at least half an hour, one of the teachers, after having emerged from deliberations, remarked how there was some "heated discussion" over the winning team, which turned out to be the *jepta* from King's Chapel. When asked about the "heated discussion," the white American teacher explained that the Marshallese placed a lot of emphasis on what the teams were wearing and did not like that one of the teams wore t-shirts rather than the traditional clothing. When asked if they (the Americans) deferred to the elders, she appeared somewhat taken aback by the question and responded "no." She volunteered that it "wouldn't be fair" if their opinions were discounted. "We thought the ones in the t-shirts had the best performance" (April L. Brown, p.c 29th July 2019).

The episode shares marked differences in values through educational method, epistemology and conferral of authority. Modern individualism procures the "isolate" though generational differentiation as well as geographical distance-making. The interpolation of the sounds of the islands into middle America creates a third space where aquaforms and terrestrial formations contour possibilities of intercultural and transpacific connection. As with geographical *jipikra*, making the interlocking third space that ripples outwards, *jepta* can



also be thought of in the aquapelagic framework of *jipikra* as two generations coming together to produce a third space of cultural survival in the US that resonates in generations to come. Marshallese elders are respected for their lifetime experiences and cultural knowledge because, as judges, they are expected to promote the values of cooperation through which society coheres. The issue of optics also seems at play, and I wonder if perhaps this goes deeper than the shirts, or if the shirts were symbolic of the modern eschewal of materials that have actual, physical connections with the islands. To be clear, modern and traditional are not opposites in the way I use them, they are sensorial orientations to communities and environmental milieu.

Marshallese and US American post-Cold War existences are modern, traditional, and interdependent; they are entangled and realised conditionally. What we hear historically through kaleidoscopic choreographies of fly-fishing, singing timbres associated with birds, and canoe-building as bonding that intersect with references to country music, projections of lyrics about Tyson Foods, and metrical whistle-blowing, for example, are all nodes that open to the flows of capital, goods, persons, labour, missionaries, and militaries in a diplomatic gesture that is *inclusive* of *both* competition and cooperation. Americanised refusals to respect voices that uphold this underlying worldview by way of the practices that showcase Marshallese songfest communality in this non-anthropocentric mode of intersectional togetherness is evidence, I believe, of the ways in which US Americans have been taught not to listen. This non-listening is a means to uphold the invisible walls that retain the individualistic isolationism and protectionism of being land-locked. In order to have a Global North, the Global South must exist as isolated groups and individuals who have a veneer, at times, of politeness that polices inclusion or an active antagonism against groups who are more closely related to them through waves of displacements than they would like to imagine. This *longue durée* erasure of the Pacific is then part of the *longue durée* of erasure of marginalisation through which centres are made and binaries sustained. To shift from waves of displacement and denigration to encouraging new waves of development that do not continue to violate the Global South but rather promote SS; the effacement of violent histories and cultural competencies must be addressed, such that cultural competencies can be used to expand the possibilities of non-hegemonic forms of development. Marshallese cultural diplomacy tacitly denounces the reification architectures of ignorance predicated on “every man is an island” or the “society of the spectacle” as relation that comes through alienation from our global histories of struggle, camaraderie and intergenerational perseverance and cooperation. SSC opportunities necessitate the mobilities afforded through opening spaces for dialogue.

As of now, the final *jepta* competition held in Springdale, occurred in April 2016. At the conclusion of the 2016 *jepta*, Irvin Camacho, then-candidate for the Arkansas House of Representatives (District 89 of Springdale), spoke briefly to any potential registered voters. Camacho, a Democratic Latino activist and community organiser who stands in support of DREAMers<sup>8</sup> and the fight of immigrants, which has become increasingly difficult and more dangerous under the Trump administration, introduced a costumed Mexican folk dance group, Comparza Morelenses Unidos En Arkansas, who performed and later posed for photos with Marshallese children.

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<sup>8</sup> The term “DREAMers” refers to undocumented migrants who arrived in the US as children and who, until March 2018, were protected under terms of the ‘Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals’ program initiated by former president Obama.

The performance of Comparza Morelenses Unidos En Arkansas at the *jepta* event was a powerful gesture of unity in the face of adversity. It was also a celebration of movement and merging movements of communities, such as the Latinx population and the Marshallese population, both of which came to Springdale for work, a better quality of life, educational opportunities, and healthcare, and have, unfortunately seen their prospects become contained by xenophobia and intergroup violence. In this political moment where people are being told they do not belong in and outside the US and are thoroughly devalued even when they are told they belong or offered inclusion, it is crucial to re-examine the ways in which made marginal populations have endeavoured and continue to aim to empower themselves. One key element of this has been forging intercultural connections that remind settler colonial societies of the shared histories they are entrained to forget and to disregard in seemingly quotidian ways. The reproduction of islands-as-isolates occurs at the level of national actions and intersubjective relations. Although brief in its inaugural instalment, the *jepta* competition provided an opportunity to study processes of intercultural tensions and the power of belief in cultural diplomacy, from the 19th Century in the Marshall Islands through the present in middle America.

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