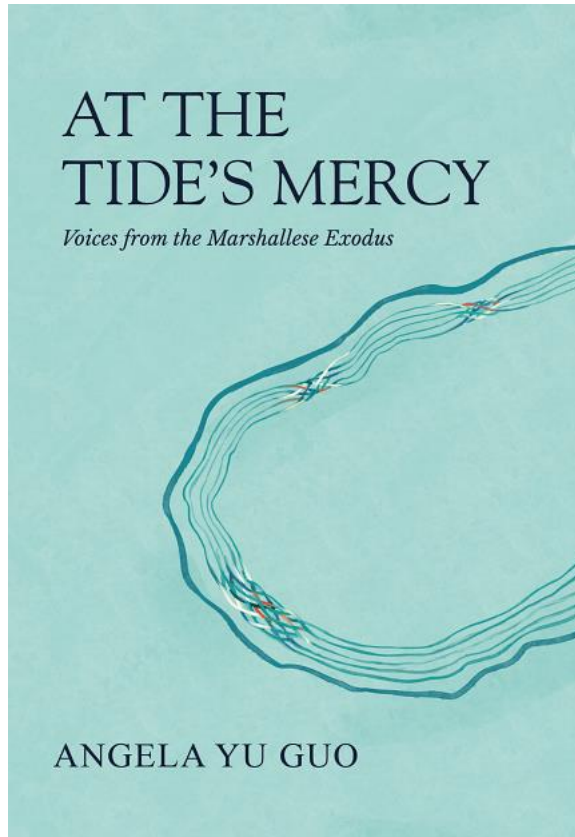




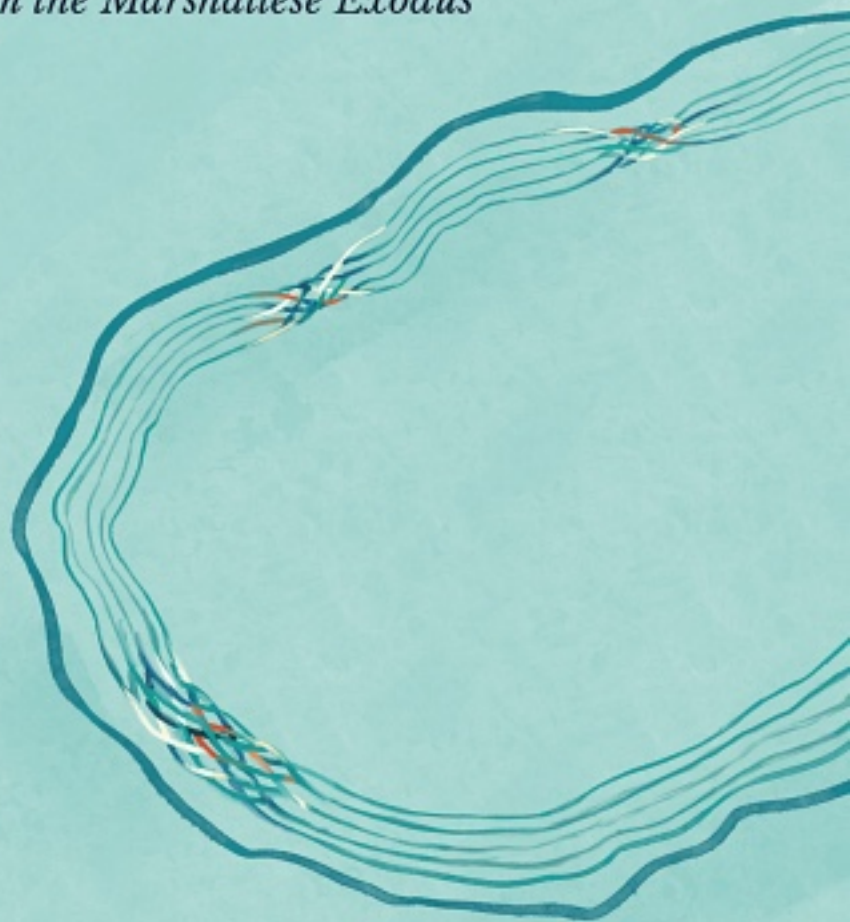
An oral history of the Marshallese exodus, drawn from 145 surveys and 19 in-depth interviews across Majuro and Seattle. Through their testimonies, it traces how nuclear trauma, exile, and resilience shape a people's search for home.

At the Tide's Mercy: Voices from the Marshallese Exodus
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AT THE TIDE'S MERCY

Voices from the Marshallese Exodus



ANGELA YU GUO

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Introduction

The Republic of the Marshall Islands lies in the central Pacific; its twenty-nine atolls and five islands—totaling over 1,200 coral islands and islets—are scattered across nearly two million square kilometers. Yet the national life of the Marshall Islands now extends farther. It reaches across the Pacific into homes, schools, hospitals, churches, and workplaces throughout the United States. Migration has changed the geography in which the country now lives.¹

The scale of that transformation is visible in the population figures. The 2021 census counted 42,418 residents in the Republic of the Marshall Islands, while the RMI Embassy has estimated that, as of 2026, more than 45,000 Marshallese citizens live in the United States. The figures come from different sources and methods, but together they point to a striking reversal: the Marshallese population abroad may now exceed the population remaining in the home islands. In examining the reasons behind migration, this book centers on the human reality inside that reversal.²

Those migrations cannot be separated from the history that narrowed the choices available. Between 1946 and 1958, the United States detonated sixty-seven nuclear weapons at Bikini and Enewetak Atolls. The tests displaced communities, contaminated land, and left unresolved questions of illness, compensation, and responsibility. Climate change now places a different pressure on the same low-lying Small Island Developing State (SIDS): rising seas, saltwater intrusion, drought, and flooding threaten homes and freshwater. Between those two crises lie the immediate conditions of daily life: limited medical care, scarce employment, expensive imported goods, and unequal access to education.³

Nuclear testing and climate change do not explain every migration in these pages, and this book does not treat Marshallese people as

passive subjects of either disaster. These forces form part of the horizon against which individual decisions are made. Much of the work of absorbing their consequences has fallen on families: choosing where to seek treatment, where to raise children, how much money to send home, who will care for elders, and whether a return remains possible.

The world has often noticed the Marshall Islands most clearly at moments of catastrophe. The country's only property on UNESCO's World Heritage List is the Bikini Atoll Nuclear Test Site, a necessary recognition of the Cold War record; images of flooded roads and seawalls now circulate as warnings about a warming planet. Both forms of attention matter. Yet they leave a large blank space around the people who live beyond those images: the worker finishing a night shift, the parent translating a medical form, the elder remembering an outer island, the young person deciding which language to speak at home. The record of what happened to the Marshall Islands is far more visible than the ordinary lives that carry its consequences forward.⁴

I began this research in May 2025 in an attempt to enter that overlooked space. The purpose of this book is not to offer policy recommendations or to claim a final explanation for Marshallese migration. It focuses instead on individual perceptions: how the history of American power is understood in everyday life, how public policies settle into family memory, and how questions of health, work, land, migration, and identity are carried in ordinary speech. The value of these accounts lies precisely in preserving and articulating the uncertainty, contradiction, humor, hesitation, and meanings people attach to their own choices.

I conducted fieldwork in Majuro in July and August 2025 and in the Seattle area in March 2026. Over the course of the project, I collected 145 valid survey responses and conducted nineteen one-on-one, semi-structured interviews. Participation was voluntary, and

every recorded interview took place only after the participant gave explicit consent. To protect privacy in publication, all interviewees appear under pseudonyms, and the survey tables in the appendix strip out names, contact information, and other identifying details. Quotations preserve the speakers' phrasing with only light editorial adjustments where clarity requires them.

From the nineteen interviews, the book follows ten lives in sustained detail. The participants range in age from twenty-five to sixty-eight and differ in occupation, family history, education, and relationship to the islands. Eight are Indigenous Marshallese; two are long-term non-Marshallese residents whose years in the country offer a different vantage on social change. Eight had made long-term homes in the United States when interviewed, while two remained based in the Marshall Islands. Together, they bring the experiences of staying, leaving, circulating, and imagining return into the same field of view.

The 145 survey responses provide a wider, though still bounded, picture. Of the respondents, 111 identified as Indigenous Marshallese and thirty-three as non-Indigenous or long-term residents; one did not specify. The survey centered on physical and mental health, memories of nuclear testing, environmental change, employment and migration, and the transmission of language and culture. Its purpose was to identify recurring concerns that could add context to the individual accounts.

The project also has its limits. Oral history records how participants remember and interpret events; it alone cannot establish medical causation or prove that a policy produced a particular social change. A survey of 145 respondents cannot stand as a census of an entire nation or diaspora. Historical documents, public data, and existing scholarship therefore help place testimony in context. Where official evidence is incomplete or participants disagree, the uncertainty remains visible rather than forced into a single conclusion.

The two forms of evidence do different work. Survey responses reveal group-level patterns; interviews preserve the hesitation before an answer, the qualification added after it, and the memories through which people interpret the present. And there was no single Marshallese account of migration among them. Participants differed by age, occupation, family history, and connection to the islands. Such differences are precisely what categories like nuclear victims, migrants, displaced islanders, or future climate refugees too often flatten. These people are recorded here not because any one of them can represent the Marshallese, but because no people should be known only through the forces acting upon them.

The pages ahead move among several dimensions of Marshallese life: the inheritance of nuclear history; anticipation of climate and health risks; the movement of people for education, health care, and career advancement; the work of caring across distance; distinctive island traditions; local economic conditions; unique political and social structures; and cultural transmission among overseas communities. These dimensions overlap, but they do not resolve into one uniform experience. The book asks the reader to sit with that complexity before deciding what migration means.

The ocean tide sustains the islands. It has also carried the larger currents of war, policy, economics, and climate that have redirected Marshallese lives. To be at the tide's mercy is to live with forces no individual can command. What that condition does to a people—and what it cannot take from them—can be understood only by listening to the voices carried across the Marshallese exodus. The stories that follow have not been told in full before. This book begins by making room for them to be heard.

Notes

¹ World Bank, *Pacific Island Economies: Toward Efficient and Sustainable Growth*, vol. 4, *Marshall Islands—Country Economic Memorandum* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 1993), iii, <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/788491468244551072/pdf/multi0page.pdf>.

² Economic Policy, Planning and Statistics Office and Pacific Community, *Republic of the Marshall Islands 2021 Census Report*, vol. 1, *Basic Tables and Administrative Report* (Noumea, New Caledonia: Pacific Community, 2023), 3, https://prdrse4all.spc.int/sites/default/files/marshall_islands_2021_census_vol1_table_report.pdf; Embassy of the Republic of the Marshall Islands to the United States of America, “Iakwe!,” accessed August 12, 2026, <https://www.rmiembassyus.org/>.

³ Calin Georgescu, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Implications for Human Rights of the Environmentally Sound Management and Disposal of Hazardous Substances and Wastes on His Mission to the Marshall Islands (27–30 March 2012) and the United States of America (24–27 April 2012)*, UN Doc. A/HRC/21/48/Add.1 (September 3, 2012), 4–12, 15–16, <https://uhri.ohchr.org/Document/File/f9216204-eb78-436c-b924-9245bcd61fc/AE50E184-4248-4AEC-897D-A00848524044>; World Bank, *Project Appraisal Document on a Proposed Grant to the Republic of the Marshall Islands for an RMI Urban Resilience Project*, Report No. PAD4708 (Washington, DC: World Bank, April 8, 2022), 8–9, 61–62, <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/285091651270771293/pdf/Marshall-Islands-RMI-Urban-Resilience-Project.pdf>.

⁴ UNESCO World Heritage Centre, “Marshall Islands,” accessed August 12, 2026, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/statesparties/mh>; UNESCO World Heritage Centre, “Bikini Atoll Nuclear Test Site,” accessed August 12, 2026, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1339>; Kevin Hamilton and Ned O’Gorman, “Seeing Experimental Imperialism in the Nuclear Pacific,” *Media+Environment* 3, no. 1 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1525/001c.18496>.

Chapter 1

Bikini Is Us

“My last name is from Bikini.”

——*Natalie*

The noise inside the bubble tea shop hit like a solid wall—a dense mash of overlapping chatter, whirring blenders, and pop music thudding from the overhead speakers. Two long queues snaked toward the counter where staff behind the bar shook cocktail shakers at breakneck speed—the clatter of ice against plastic cups crackling in a steady, percussive rush. Around us, customers walked past clutching pearl milk teas and cheese-topped fruit teas. Natalie and I found a seat by the window, huddled around a tiny round table. I asked what she'd like to drink.

“Just water,” she said.

Rain streaked the window beside our table, blurring the waterfront beyond it.

Two hours earlier, I had finished lunch with a group of friends from the Pacific Islands. Danny, Natalie's boyfriend, had recommended the restaurant: a semi-basement Korean barbecue joint in a quiet corner of Seattle. A young man with a booming laugh, he spent the entire meal grilling meat for everyone and flagging down waitstaff for more side dishes. Natalie sat beside him, speaking little, occasionally reaching over to brush a stray lock of hair from his forehead.

She was twenty-five, with a round face, large eyes, and long curls spilling over the collar of her puffer jacket. Seattle in March was still chilly, but she wore a short skirt and heels, dressed like any other American college student. She was studying criminal justice and expected to graduate from college the following year.

As we left the restaurant, Danny crouched on the wet pavement to retie the loose strap of her high heels. She steadied herself with a hand on his shoulder, the corners of her mouth curving slightly. The gesture carried the easy intimacy of two people accustomed to caring for each other. Later, whenever I asked Natalie about her plans for work or

marriage, she said she would first have to discuss them with her boyfriend.

Of all the people I met in Seattle, Natalie was the first descended from the displaced community of Bikini Atoll. It is an uncommon identity. The combined landmass of Bikini's twenty-three coral islands amounts to just 5.5 square kilometers. Before the U.S. nuclear testing program began in 1946, the entire atoll was home to 167 people—a population small enough to fit inside a single New York City subway car.⁵

When we sat down in the boba shop, I was still unsure how to broach the subject. Before I could, she began introducing herself.

"My name is Natalie. My dad, my last name is from Bikini."

Pale sunlight slanted through the window, casting a soft halo across her dark brown eyes. The name carried a history far larger than the table between us: twenty-three American nuclear detonations, a homeland still contaminated by radiation, and a community unable to return permanently. Around the world, Bikini is better known as the name of a swimsuit. For Natalie, it was where her father's family—and her surname—came from.

Her surname was Note, a name also borne by Kessai H. Note, the first president of the Marshall Islands to come from outside the traditional chiefly class. Although born on Ailinglaplap Atoll, he belonged to the Bikinian community and began his public career as a translator and spokesman for the Bikini Atoll Council.⁶

She said it without emphasis, as though the connection required no explanation. What entered historical records as removal, testing, contamination, and exile had reached her as family knowledge: stories told so often that they had become part of how she introduced herself.

Later, when our conversation turned to cancer—to the relatives on her father's side who had died from it and the grandparents she had

never known—her smile faded. She fell silent for a moment, looked toward the counter, and said, “I’ll have a bubble tea too.”

I did not ask why she had changed her mind. I remember only when she did.

The bombs had been detonated decades before Natalie was born, and her parents had not witnessed them either. Still, their legacy ran through her life: a family history marked by cancer, annual physical examinations, and a surname tied to a homeland to which her family could not safely return.

I. The Paradise

In Bikinian memory, the atoll before nuclear testing was a paradise.

In Marshallese, Bikini is also spelled *Pikinni*. Its twenty-three islands surround a lagoon of over 600 square kilometers. Although Natalie had never seen the intact homeland, she had assembled an image of it from stories passed down by her elders: low-roofed wooden huts lining the shore, coconut palms and breadfruit trees covering the islands, sea turtles gliding slowly through the lagoon, and brilliant schools of tropical fish moving through the water like flowing rainbows.⁷

The lagoon provided sheltered grounds for fishing and voyaging. Although the Bikinians lived chiefly on Bikini Island, they made use of the atoll’s other islets and its large lagoon. Their way of life was maritime: skilled navigators sailed outrigger canoes between the islets of the atoll. They wove fishing nets from coconut fiber and constructed stone-walled fish weirs on the reef flats. Fishing methods were accompanied by taboos, social hierarchies, ritual procedures, and magic chants that joined spiritual, social, and economic life. The Bikinian diet consisted mainly of food gathered from the lagoon and

reefs, supplemented by breadfruit, coconut, and pandanus grown on land.⁸

For generations, the islanders lived in relative isolation from other Marshallese communities, self-sufficient and politically independent, until they were incorporated into the broader chiefly system of the Marshall Islands in the late nineteenth century. Before 1946, Bikini's residents belonged to eight corporate matrilineages. Each lineage held distinctive rights in one or more of the atoll's estates, and rights to these estates ordinarily passed through matrilineal inheritance from one generation to the next.⁹

Why did the United States choose Bikini Atoll? Natalie did not offer a direct explanation, but the answer lies in the history of American military control over the Marshall Islands and the Navy's search for a place to test the atomic bomb against warships.

American military control of the Marshall Islands began in 1944, when U.S. forces invaded the Japanese-administered archipelago during their advance across the Central Pacific toward the Marianas and ultimately Japan. Afterward, the islands fell under U.S. military rule.¹⁰

Operation Crossroads, the U.S.'s first postwar nuclear test series, emerged from scientific uncertainty about atomic warfare and institutional struggle over the Navy's place in the atomic age. Hiroshima and Nagasaki had demonstrated the bomb's destructive capacity, but its effects on ships and military equipment remained poorly understood. Moreover, the Army Air Forces controlled the only means of carrying atomic weapons to enemy targets. Consequently, the Navy feared that the bomb would render its fleet obsolete and threaten its appropriations, creating a perceived need to test it against warships.¹¹

Navy officers began searching for a test site in October 1945. Their requirements included a lagoon large enough for a target fleet,

proximity to an air base, and predictable weather and currents. The site also had to be distant from the continental United States, under American control, and away from substantial populations. Vice Admiral William H. P. Blandy, who commanded the joint Army–Navy task force responsible for planning and conducting Operation Crossroads, further specified that any population should be sufficiently “small and co-operative” to permit relocation “with a minimum of trouble.” These criteria favored the Marshall Islands, where geographic isolation and American military control allowed the Navy to regulate access to the test area. On January 24, 1946, the Navy announced that Bikini had been selected for two detonations: Able, an air drop, and Baker, a shallow underwater detonation. On February 6, four days before Commodore Ben H. Wyatt—the American military governor of the Marshall Islands—sought the Bikinians’ assent to leave, the survey ship USS *Sumner* arrived at Bikini and began charting the lagoon and blasting coral to clear channels for the target fleet. Military geography produced Bikini as an ideal test site by defining remoteness in relation to places the United States valued and casting the atoll itself as marginal.¹²

Natalie later summarized those calculations: “[Bikini] was flat and open, and it had a big lagoon. And they said we were few and manageable.”

On February 10, 1946, Wyatt arrived at Bikini, just after the Bikinians’ Sunday church services, to seek the community’s assent to relocation. Through an interpreter, Wyatt told the Bikinians that the U.S. government wished to use nuclear testing to “turn this great destructive force into something good for mankind” and “to end all world wars.”¹³

“They agreed,” Natalie said. “What else could they do? They had no choice.”

Many Marshallese then associated American Protestant missionization with *meram*, “enlightenment,” crediting missionaries with ending inter-atoll warfare and instilling biblical values. This history made the U.S.’s appeal to world peace both intelligible and credible. More recently, many Marshallese viewed the Americans who had decisively defeated Japan as powerful liberators, especially since the Japanese had requisitioned food and labor while the Americans offered trade goods, medical care, and other assistance. Cooperation could therefore express gratitude toward the new occupiers. Yet, at the same time, the Bikinians faced an occupying military power newly armed with unprecedented destructive force, and they possessed little knowledge of nuclear weapons or radiation. Later Bikinian testimony emphasizes that the islanders agreed to leave reluctantly and only on the understanding that their exile would be temporary.¹⁴

I asked Natalie, “Do you think the Americans really believed it was for peace back then?”

She gave a faint smile and replied, “I don’t know. But they didn’t ask us. They told us. They never asked for our consent. They simply gave us notice.” Indeed, the task force for Operation Crossroads had already ordered the evacuation complete by March 15 when Wyatt arrived at Bikini.¹⁵

II. The Exile

On March 7, 1946, the Navy transported all 167 Bikinians to Rongerik Atoll. The Bikinians carried dried coconuts, taro, and fresh water; they sprinkled petals and coconut milk before their ancestral graves, locked their wooden doors, and cast one last look back at the turquoise lagoon. Rongerik was uninhabited and substantially smaller than Bikini, with a much smaller lagoon, poorer vegetation, scarce fresh water, and inadequate sources of food.¹⁶

Natalie's grandfather was not even ten years old that year, when he began to wander with his family. She recalled the stories he had told her: "They were really struggling. Not enough food for them. My grandpa was with his dad helping people coming over... He was one of the kids, with his dad, that went on the ship to rescue people and move them." She continued, "I remember he was telling me all he had was like an orange. Everybody was sick and hungry."

Within two months, the Bikinians were already reporting that Rongerik could not support them and asking to return home. Their requests were denied. In 1948, the U.S. moved them to Kwajalein and then to Kili, a single island of just 0.9 square kilometers, with no lagoon to sustain the fishing and voyaging on which Bikinian life had depended.¹⁷

Between 1946 and 1958, the United States detonated sixty-seven nuclear weapons in the Marshall Islands, twenty-three of them at Bikini Atoll. On March 1, 1954, the United States detonated Castle Bravo at Bikini, a fifteen-megaton thermonuclear weapon and the largest nuclear detonation the nation ever conducted.¹⁸

The most powerful was Castle Bravo. Though the Bikinians had already been removed from their atoll, the residents of nearby atolls Rongelap and Utirik had not. Winds carried radioactive fallout over the atolls, whose inhabitants were not evacuated until several days later. On Rongelap, the fallout descended as a white powder. Children played in it, mistaking it for snow they had never seen, while women combed it into their hair. Within hours, people suffered nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea; within days, skin lesions appeared and their hair began to fall out.¹⁹

Natalie connected the period after the explosion to continuing illness and hardship: "They basically had themselves, like besides all the illnesses, they were struggling to survive daily." Natalie continued,

“My great grandpa is one of the people who spoke up for them to be able to get food and money from the U.S.”

Although the Marshall Islands had become a United Nations trust territory under U.S. administration in 1947, the fallout exposed the limits of America’s obligation to protect its inhabitants’ health. U.S.-funded health programs have designated Bikini, Enewetak, Rongelap, and Utirik as the four nuclear-affected atolls. Natalie said she has many friends from these four atolls and connected their experience to that of her own community. “Getting cancer and not being able to go back. It’s basically the same thing that we’re going through. It all leads to the same situations.”²⁰

In 1968, U.S. officials had announced that Bikini could again be inhabited, and during the following decade 139 Bikinians ultimately resettled there. Beginning in 1969, the United States cleared radioactive debris and other physical hazards from Bikini and replanted coconut and other fruit trees. But the cleanup had not eliminated the radionuclides embedded in the environment. Cesium-137 entered coconuts and other locally grown foods and accumulated in residents’ bodies. Longer-lived radioactive elements, including plutonium-239 and plutonium-240, also remained in Bikini’s soil and lagoon sediments. In 1978, whole-body measurements revealed an approximately tenfold increase in the residents’ cesium-137 levels. That year, the United States relocated the 139 residents to Kili and Ejit; no Bikinian community has resettled Bikini since.²¹

The Bikinians subsequently dispersed across Kili, Ejit, Majuro, and communities abroad. Natalie described the geography of that displacement in the simplest terms: “We moved to two small islands, one near the main town, and the other you have to reach by plane or boat. We have migrated to different islands that’s not ours, because there is nowhere to live in Bikini anymore.”

Bikini remains largely uninhabited apart from a small caretaker workforce and temporary visitors engaged in research and related activities. International assessments have concluded that permanent resettlement without substantial remedial measures is not advisable because of continuing exposure through locally produced food.²²

"Nobody's allowed to live. Only for Bikini, not allowed to live there," Natalie said. "People just go for research and scientific stuff to test it out."

When I asked if she might ever go back, she corrected the premise of my question: "There is no place to return to."

For the Bikinians, exile became a sequence in which each promised remedy produced another displacement: from Bikini to Rongerik, from Rongerik to Kwajalein, from Kwajalein to Kili, and from an attempted return to another evacuation. Their history was not a single removal in 1946, but a succession of departures that never resolved the first.

III. The Body

Rongerik, where the Bikinians had first been relocated, was heavily contaminated by Castle Bravo in 1954, but the community had already been moved to Kwajalein and then Kili in 1948. Some Bikinians were exposed later, after returning to Bikini and consuming locally grown food before their second evacuation in 1978.²³

Natalie understood radiation's effects through the history of cancer in her family. "A lot of my family have cancer, a lot of different types of cancer and have passed away. Cancer is known and it's a lot of different effects from the radiation." Her grandparents, she said, "both passed away from cancer." When I asked at what ages her relatives had died, she recalled one "around thirty-something" and several uncles and aunts who were "some older, in their fifties and sixties."

She did not specify which types of cancer they had, only that “everyone is different.”

A 2010 National Cancer Institute-led study cautioned that no comprehensive epidemiological study had determined the total number of cancers and other serious illnesses among Marshallese people resulting from radioactive fallout. Nor had cancers among the general Marshallese population been reliably diagnosed and recorded since the testing program ended.²⁴

In the absence of a comprehensive official record, Natalie offered another kind of record: the family tree itself. Regarding her parents who remained in the Marshall Islands, I asked, “How is your parents’ health now?” She paused. “So far so good.”

Her father had not yet come to the United States for an examination. “He hasn’t come forward, but he hasn’t come to check up here yet.” He worked at a bank in the Marshall Islands, where he handled “Compact funds”—money allocated for building local homes. He chose to stay there, not because he is indifferent to his health, but because he cares more about his work, his land, and his sense of belonging. I asked, “Isn’t your father afraid?” Natalie thought for a moment. “Maybe they have concerns, but they don’t really show it.”²⁵

She worried more openly about her own health. “I do. I get checked, I usually do a body check every year,” she said, “because of my family history of cancer.” She described the extent of that routine: “I get a full physical every year—every test, nothing skipped. I just had one last month, and everything is fine for now.”

“Fine for now.” To me, the phrase carried the emotional imprint of inherited radiation uncertainty: peace of mind with an expiration date. An annual examination could not resolve the uncertainty Natalie inherited from her family history; it could only renew a provisional verdict on her health and place the next examination on the calendar. This was not the fear that follows a definite diagnosis. It was a standing

relationship to her own body as something under surveillance—watched, tested, and made to await another result.

I then asked whether medical care in the Marshall Islands was free. “Medical is free for us from Bikini. Also, if you’re married to someone from Bikini, you can also get free health care in the RMI. It’s part of the compact.” That refers to the Compact of Free Association (COFA) and its implementing legislation, which included provisions for a nuclear-claims trust fund and health services for people from the four nuclear-affected atolls. Yet free care was not necessarily adequate. “It could be better. I understand more materials are needed,” Natalie said.²⁶

Danny said local medical visits in the Marshall Islands cost only five dollars, but waiting times were long and emergencies such as appendicitis could require travel to Hawai‘i. He recalled even scabies cases being treated as emergencies.

Natalie gave an example: her mother had been diagnosed with “gastritis” at a hospital in the Marshall Islands, and she took medication for three months without improving. Tests in Seattle later detected what doctors identified as early-stage gallbladder polyps—which, if left untreated, could have turned cancerous.

“It almost got delayed too long,” Natalie said. “All of it is not good. Sometimes they diagnose you wrong, like they would say you have something and when you come to the state to get tested. When you go and get a check-up, sometimes they diagnose you with something else. When you come to the states and then get a check-up, they’re like, this is what you’re gonna have, what’s happening to you, like you need to get checked out sooner. It’s dangerous. Or like giving the wrong medicine.”

The history Natalie inherited also contained questions that her generation had not yet learned to ask. When I asked about the psychological effects on those who had lived through the testing and

displacement, Natalie was less certain: “I feel like it should be the older generation that have the mental health issues. But I don’t think that I’ve ever asked them if it affected them in any way. So, I do not know about their answer, the older generations’ answer. I’ve never asked.”

I asked whether there were any psychologists in the Marshall Islands.

“I only know one,” she answered. “I think there’s only one. I think he’s Filipino, I believe, but there’s only one, but it’s really needed. Limited.”

She may have been referring to a psychiatrist. The World Health Organization’s 2020 country profile recorded one psychiatrist and no psychologists in the Marshall Islands, alongside three mental-health nurses and four other specialized workers. It also reported no community-based mental-health facilities. These figures supported Natalie’s broader point: formal mental-health resources were severely scarce. Danny likewise described mental-health services and public understanding as inadequate, linking these limitations to what he regarded as the country’s persistently high suicide rate. Mental-health care formed part of a broader medical system that both he and Natalie described as overextended.²⁷

Natalie nevertheless left the conversation with a resolution. “I’ll be asking the question now,” she said.

IV. The Unnameable

“After the bombing, women that were affected were giving birth to jellyfish babies, like jelly.”

The phrase was beyond my comprehension and imagination. Seeing the confusion on my face, Natalie raised both hands and shaped the air between them, tracing something that would not hold a

recognizable form. The expression on her face as she made those motions was at once tender and complicated. "They look like jellyfish, not normal," she said.

The air turned still as I tried to imagine it, then hesitated before pressing on. "So this kind of baby is still alive?"

"No, they died."

She answered without hesitation, flat and complete. In Natalie's account, these births belonged to a past she had learned about from elders, who spoke of women giving birth to infants resembling jellyfish. Natalie had later seen pictures of those babies. "Yeah. A little bit better than before," she said. "That doesn't happen anymore."

The phrase connected Natalie's Bikinian family history to a wider Marshallese vocabulary of nuclear harm. Marshallese women drew upon familiar creatures and objects to describe reproductive outcomes for which, survivors said, their language had previously contained no names. Testifying before the International Court of Justice in 1995, Rongelap survivor Lijon Eknilang recalled women describing abnormal births as "octopuses," "apples," and "turtles." She identified "jellyfish" babies as the most common form reported on Rongelap and nearby islands, describing infants without bones and with transparent skin who generally survived for only a day or two. "Many women die from abnormal pregnancies and those who survive give birth to what looks like purple grapes which we quickly hide away and bury," said Eknilang.²⁸

Eknilang's testimony also revealed why many of these experiences remained outside official records. Reproductive abnormalities could be interpreted as evidence that a woman had been unfaithful, leading some women to conceal what had happened. In that silence, metaphor became a means of recognition. "Jellyfish babies" was not a medical diagnosis but a language through which Marshallese women could describe experiences that otherwise resisted speech.²⁹

Women activists later carried this vocabulary into international forums, while Marshallese writers and artists transformed it into an image of nuclear violence extending across generations. Marshallese poet and climate activist Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner's poetry, for example, places accounts of "jellyfish babies" beside miscarriages, cancer, displacement, and the silences surrounding women's reproductive experiences. When Natalie shaped the words with her hands in the bubble tea shop, she was speaking this inherited language: words created to name what had once seemed unnameable and passed down with the history of the tests themselves.³⁰

Although Natalie understood such births as belonging to the past, the phrase has not disappeared from public accounts of the Marshall Islands' nuclear legacy. A 2024 report by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights recorded miscarriages, stillbirths, and what some Marshallese call "jellyfish babies" among the reproductive harms described during its consultations. The report demonstrates the persistence of these accounts, but it does not establish that "jellyfish babies" continue to be born today or prove that particular contemporary pregnancies result from inherited genetic damage. What has unmistakably persisted is the language itself.³¹

Cancer located nuclear history in Natalie's family tree; "jellyfish babies" carried it into questions of reproduction and the future. Natalie said that descent from the affected atolls did not invite discrimination in either the Marshall Islands or the United States. "No bullying," she said. "People have always been sympathetic." Her mother had never hesitated to marry her father. Yet Natalie acknowledged a quieter unease when the conversation turned to having children. A story inherited from elders had become a possibility attached to future pregnancy.

For Natalie's generation, this inherited knowledge provides neither a diagnosis nor a prediction. It gives uncertainty a form. The story of

“jellyfish babies” connects a past she did not witness to a future she cannot know, showing how the nuclear legacy travels not only through contaminated lands and medical records but also through the words families preserve—and the gestures through which one generation teaches the next how to imagine them.

V. The Debt

On Runit Island in Enewetak Atoll, American cleanup crews placed more than 100,000 cubic yards of contaminated soil and debris inside the unlined crater left by the Cactus nuclear test, mixed the material with concrete, and covered it with a concrete cap. A 2020 Department of Energy assessment concluded that the Runit Dome was not in immediate danger of collapse, but acknowledged that it remained a source of concern for the people of Enewetak and that contaminated groundwater could move beneath the structure. The dome has become a monument to a larger administrative impulse: contain the residue, draw a boundary around it, and monitor what remains.³²

The compensation system rests on a similar tension. The programs created to manage nuclear harm—the Four Atoll Health Care Program, the Department of Energy’s radiation monitoring, and the Nuclear Claims Tribunal—have themselves become part of the inheritance passed to later generations. The Section 177 health program remains formally centered on Bikini, Enewetak, Rongelap, and Utirik. Among the Marshallese people I interviewed who discussed this boundary, the response was consistent: it was too narrow. “All of the Marshall Islands were affected,” several told me.³³

This structure dates to the original COFA, which entered into force in 1986. Under Section 177, the United States accepted responsibility for compensation owed for injuries and property damage resulting

from its nuclear testing program. Its implementing agreement provided \$150 million for a Nuclear Claims Fund and established the Nuclear Claims Tribunal to adjudicate claims. Congress simultaneously treated the agreement as the “full and final settlement” of all related claims, including those then pending in American courts. Although the agreement allowed the Marshall Islands to petition Congress if subsequently discovered injuries made the settlement manifestly inadequate, it did not require Congress to provide additional money. In 2004, the United States concluded that there was no legal basis for further compensation. By the time the claims fund was depleted in 2009, more than \$2.2 billion in personal-injury and property awards remained unpaid, according to the Marshall Islands government.³⁴

The Compact’s economic provisions were renewed in 2024, but the amendments expressly preserved the finality of the Section 177 settlement. They instead provided new economic assistance, including \$700 million in contributions to a separate Compact Trust Fund that the Marshall Islands government said would help address the needs of those affected by nuclear testing. The broader Compact also preserved American defense prerogatives, including operation of the Ronald Reagan Ballistic Missile Defense Test Site on Kwajalein Atoll.³⁵

When I asked Natalie how much compensation she received, I mentioned having heard that some people received \$3,000.

“I get \$1,000.00. It’s really different. It depends on who’s running the office, I guess. Yeah, it’s different for everybody and there’s also different funds because they just added new ones. Now they added three more islands because usually it was four before. They added three more.”

Her answer did not map neatly onto any single program. The specific fund responsible for her \$1,000 payment remained unclear, and the expansion she described should not be treated as a formal

change to the Four Atoll Health Care Program, which still covers four atolls. Other Compact, national, and local programs operate with different funds and eligibility lists. That institutional overlap was itself part of what her answer revealed: compensation reached her not as a single coherent settlement but through changing offices, programs, categories, and amounts.

“So, some get a thousand, some get three thousand—there’s no uniform standard?” I asked.

“Now it’s not just for those that were affected. So, it might be less than before because they have to separate it to more islands too.”

“Do you think this compensation is enough?”

She shook her head before I had finished the question.

“Not enough for everybody. Yeah, not enough”—the words repeated without anger.

Her answer named more than a difference between \$1,000 and \$3,000. The first grievance was adequacy: payments varied, while the rules determining those variations remained difficult to see. The second was scope. Natalie said that three islands had recently been added; another respondent remembered a different expansion. Their numbers should not be read as competing descriptions of a single policy, because different programs use different boundaries. What aligned was their conviction that the four-atoll framework could not encompass the geography of nuclear harm. Danny put the objection plainly: “Why only those four tiny atolls? The dust, the fish, and the rain observe no such line.”

Beneath disputes over amounts and eligibility lay a deeper grievance: compensation could not restore the Bikinians’ ancestral homeland. When Natalie explained why the payments were insufficient, she hardly mentioned herself. “It’s not enough for everybody. We haven’t returned and we were not able to go back to our island. Yes, it’s all gone now. It’s really deadly.”

She continued: “For more generations to come because the younger ones don’t get to experience what living in Bikini was like and their motherland. So, they had to leave their motherland, that is not enough to go back.”

“Motherland”—she used the word twice. Bikini was a place she had never inhabited, yet she understood its loss as extending through her family and into generations still to come.

Within *manit*—Indigenous Marshallese knowledge and practice—land anchors identity, lineage, political authority, labor, and subsistence. Particular lands and lagoons sustained breadfruit, pandanus, coconut, fishing, and ritual practices that could not simply be reproduced elsewhere. Land also holds theological meaning as “jolet jen Anij,” a “sacred inheritance from God.” Marshallese testimony has described land as one’s “being, essence, reason for living,” and the first national anthem of the Marshall Islands closes with “Emman lok mae inaj mij ie”: “It’s best for me to die here,” because one’s own land is “my true place” and “my inheritance forever.” Relocation could therefore provide another place to live, but it could not reproduce the relationships among people, resources, ancestors, and history that made Bikini a homeland. A 2024 review by the United Nations Human Rights Office documented this continuing rupture: some displaced Bikinians and Rongelapese refrained from cultivating land that was not their own and practiced above-ground burial in the hope that the deceased might one day be returned to their home atolls.³⁶

In this context, “not enough” named more than an inadequate payment. The Nuclear Claims Tribunal could assign monetary values to property and personal injuries, but no award could give Natalie’s generation the experience of living on Bikini or restore the inheritance she described as their motherland. The legal language of Section 177 sought to settle claims arising from the past; her account concerned a

deprivation still being handed forward. Compensation written in the past tense could not answer harm experienced in the future tense.

I asked, “Do you feel that your siblings or the younger generation think it’s unfair?”

She reflected for a moment. “The younger generation, like they got the idea of it and they actually fight for their rights. There’s a lot of them that do a lot of work outside of the Marshall Islands to fight for justice for the island. I feel like there’s a lot of us that grew up with it. Yeah, they have a strong connection.”

VI. The Distance

“Do you feel that the culture is disappearing?” I asked.

“A lot of things that they do here, a lot of people are doing it over there now,” Natalie replied. By “here,” she meant the United States; by “there,” the Marshall Islands. She pointed to Nike clothing and hip-hop as examples of styles moving between the two places. “Basically, the culture is slowly disappearing,” she added. Language offered her clearest example. Some children raised in Majuro could not speak Marshallese; her younger cousins, although they had grown up in the Marshall Islands, spoke only English.

Natalie also mentioned that some young Marshallese had begun wearing bikinis. “Showing too much body is not good for Marshallese culture,” she said. The word carried an irony particular to her family history. Four days after the first Operation Crossroads detonation at Bikini Atoll, French fashion designer Louis Réard unveiled a two-piece swimsuit at a Paris pool on July 5, 1946, naming it the bikini after the atoll then appearing in newspaper headlines. Nearly eighty years later, the garment whose name had carried Bikini around the world appeared in Natalie’s account as one sign of changing Marshallese norms. The connection was symbolic, however; she did

not suggest that the swimsuit itself had caused the broader cultural changes she described.³⁷

Natalie did not regard cultural disappearance as inevitable. “It really depends on us, like my generation all the way down to pick it up and continue it.” She continued, “I speak fluent [Marshallese], actually. With my boyfriend and with my family and my friends. I speak fluent Marshallese now.” She described preparing traditional foods, including taro and breadfruit cooked in coconut milk and freshly grilled fish. Every September, she also participated in the national holiday of Manit Day.

“It’s like a cultural day. Marshallese people, you wear Marshallese accessories and dresses and make only Marshallese food. Learn about the culture, learn how to make stuff from the Marshall Islands like necklaces by using shells and learn about canoes and boats and fishing.”

Danny likewise identified the greatest threat to cultural transmission as “not practicing it.” Work and bills, he explained, left many parents with little time to teach children born in the United States. Without Natalie, he would have even fewer opportunities to speak Marshallese. Living abroad had made him more conscious of how much he missed the culture and of the deliberate effort required to maintain it.

For both of them, however, cultural continuity did not require permanent residence in the Marshall Islands. It depended on what people practiced wherever they lived. When I asked where members of her family wanted to make their lives, Natalie answered, “It’s different for everybody.”

Natalie has two sisters and three brothers. One sister and two brothers lived in the United States, while her other sister and brother remained in the Marshall Islands; additional relatives lived in Hawai‘i. Her younger sister planned to begin college in the Marshall Islands, where, Natalie said, she could attend for free, and later transfer to a

school in the United States. The two siblings who stayed in the Marshalls lived near their parents, paid no rent, and preferred the slower pace of life.

Her father had made the same choice. “He doesn’t wanna come back. He lives in the Marshall Islands, he likes it. He doesn’t like the cold. He likes living there. He chose to live in the Marshall Islands, not the USA. He likes the weather and because he has a house there.”

Natalie chose Seattle for its health care and employment opportunities and because she preferred the weather. Living in the United States did not mean withdrawing from responsibilities in the Marshall Islands. “I may be able to help like in any way I can, if it’s needed, I would love to help, but I definitely—my life will be here, just there for visits.”

I asked, “After retirement? Would you go back?”

She laughed. “It would be something to ask my boyfriend. So maybe if he agrees to it, I’ll probably think about it. Maybe, yeah. Or, if there are funerals or family events, I’ll go back to the RMI for special occasions.”

Born in the United States, Natalie had spent nearly twenty years in the Marshall Islands before returning to America for study and work. Her life has shuttled back and forth between the islands and the mainland. Although she plans to remain in Seattle, she does not treat residence as the boundary of her connection to the Marshall Islands.

Not every Marshallese migrant Natalie knew, however, felt equally secure in the United States. Some were “scared or afraid” of deportation. COFA permits eligible Marshallese citizens to live and work indefinitely in the United States as lawful nonimmigrants, but that status does not make them permanent residents or citizens. “So, they’re living in fear,” she said.³⁸

Danny described seeing more vacant houses and fewer registered voters in the Marshall Islands, changes he associated with outward

migration. Leaving or staying was not a referendum on Marshallese identity but a practical decision shaped by employment, rent, tuition, medical care, family, and the security people felt in each place.

Whether the culture endured was a different question. That depended, as Natalie had said, on whether her generation chose “to pick it up and continue it.”

VII. The Faith

Every August, bells ring through Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park as survivors, descendants, scholars, and peace advocates gather to remember the atomic bombing. Natalie was among them.³⁹

Addressing the gathering, she began with the history she had inherited: “I talked about where I’m from, what I do now, my family’s story being directly tied to the legacy of nuclear testing in the Pacific. I talked about painful consequences and the chronic health issues, generational trauma and the harsh reality of being permanently displaced from our ancestral homeland. I also talked about how a lot of my family passed away from cancer, probably like ninety percent of them.”

Those losses were the beginning of her account, not its conclusion. She described her purpose as “being able to carry the legacy and to turn the weight into advocacy, healing, and meaningful changes.”

During her week in Hiroshima, Natalie said, “I learned a lot.” What stayed with her was the place of peace within the city’s public memory. “I admire [how] they’re really rooted and just finding peace and to be at peace; it’s like their whole life model over there, and it’s something that I learned over there.”

Natalie was not suggesting that Hiroshima had moved beyond trauma or that Marshallese responses were defined only by anger. Rather, Hiroshima showed her how remembrance could be organized

around an explicit commitment to peace. The experience expanded her sense of what advocacy might seek: not forgetting the past or relinquishing demands for redress, but directing that memory toward preventing further harm.

Afterward, she joined the Nuclear Disarmament Youth Program. “Because I believe that learning about nuclear disarmament on an international level deepens my understanding of global justice,” she said, “and it helps my ability to advocate for nuclear legacy survivors in the Marshall Islands. I feel the youth programs like that really provide vital spaces for learning and reflection and action.”

The program also brought her international advocacy back to her own history. “By participating in the program, I also strengthened my sense of cultural identity, and deepened my connection to my family and friends, and with my history.” She added that she loved the work. “I really feel like it really could provide people with tools needed for like peace building and public advocacy leadership with nuclear.”

Alongside her discussion of advocacy, Natalie described prayer and faith as central to Bikinian life. One of the most enduring expressions of that faith originated with Juda, the Bikinian leader who answered Commodore Ben H. Wyatt’s request that the community leave Bikini in 1946. After affirming the Bikinians’ willingness to depart, Juda added, “Men otemjej rej ilo bein Anij”—“Everything is in God’s hands.” Known by the acronym MORIBA, the phrase became a Bikinian motto.⁴⁰

“That’s our life motto. We apply everything to it,” Natalie said. The words were tattooed onto her relatives’ bodies, painted on speedboats, and inscribed on the Bikinian flag. They offered comfort during personal and financial crises while also carrying the history of displacement into public claims for justice.⁴¹

“My family are all Protestants,” she explained. “God is a really big thing back home. It’s really active. Everybody’s always at church.”

Natalie did not attend church every week, but she still understood faith as fundamental to her family and community.

Attending the event in Hiroshima led Natalie to reconsider how she could advocate for her community. Later, while spending time in the Marshall Islands, she visited Kili and witnessed the community's continuing struggles firsthand. The experience deepened her commitment: "I really wanted to help them in so many ways."

Yet she did not want that commitment to take the form of accusation alone. "I didn't want to just be like, [to the U.S.,] 'Hey, you should give me this because you know, we deserve it. You did this to us. We can't go back home,'" she said. "I just wanted to advocate more about peace and what we can do to bring everybody together to meet in the middle." By "the middle," she meant cooperation rather than opposition: "It's not being against each other, just together, working together to build more and better the Bikinian community. That's really all I want right now." Her aim, she said, was "to inspire, instead of bringing more hate towards different countries."

"That's what I stand for, and I stand for the people and what I think is right," she said. "That's what really inspired me, just being able to stand up for what's right."

VIII. The Name

Near the end of our hour, after the boba was finished and Danny had gone to bring the car around, I asked Natalie, "If one day Bikini Atoll is declared safe, would you want to go and see it?"

"I don't know," she replied. "I've never seen it. My dad has seen it—he was a baby when they left. He doesn't really remember. But he says the lagoon was the most beautiful blue he's ever seen in any photograph. I would like to see that blue. Even if I can't stay, I want to see it once."

“Will you tell your children everything about Bikini?” I asked.

“Yeah. I’ll start from when they’re babies so they can speak Marshallese and English. And I’ll tell them, this is where our family came from. This is where our name belongs.”

Outside, the rain had not stopped. Somewhere past the breakwater, the same ocean that touches Bikini was going out with the tide.

“Bikini is not an island,” she said. “Bikini is us.”

Notes

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⁶ RNZ, “Honourable Kessai Note,” <https://www.rnz.co.nz/collections/nff-marshall>; Charles J. Hanley, “Exiled Bikinians Sing of Promises, but Face Exodus without End,” *Associated Press*, April 25, 2004, <https://www.bikiniatoll.com/AssocPress.html>.

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¹¹ Holly M. Barker, *Bravo for the Marshallese: Regaining Control in a Post-nuclear, Post-colonial World*, 2nd ed. (Wadsworth, 2013), 20; William A. Shurcliff, *Bombs at Bikini: The Official Report of Operation Crossroads* (Wm. H. Wise & Co., 1947), 2–8, 11–13; Jonathan M. Weisgall, *Operation Crossroads: The Atomic Tests at Bikini Atoll* (Naval Institute Press, 1994), 14–16.

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¹³ Jonathan M. Weisgall, “The Nuclear Nomads of Bikini,” *Foreign Policy*, no. 39 (1980): 77, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1148413>; Weisgall, *Operation Crossroads*, 108; Waldo Drake, “Work of U.S. Chief in Islands Lauded,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 14, 1946, 4, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/380741425/>; Commodore Ben H. Wyatt, USN (Ret.), interview by Dorothy E. Richard, Washington, DC, May 2, 1952, quoted in Dorothy E. Richard, *United States Naval Administration of the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands* (Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, 1957), 3:509–10, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.b3350196&seq=1>.

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¹⁶ Weisgall, *Operation Crossroads*, 1, 8, 109; Weisgall, “The Nuclear,” 80–81; Mason, “The Bikinians,” 7.

¹⁷ Mason, “The Bikinians,” 8; Kiste, *The Bikinians*, 88, 94–95; Dirk H. R. Spennemann, “Marshall Islands Atoll Information,” Digital Micronesia, last modified May 1998, <https://marshall.csu.edu.au/Marshalls/html/atolls/kili.html>.

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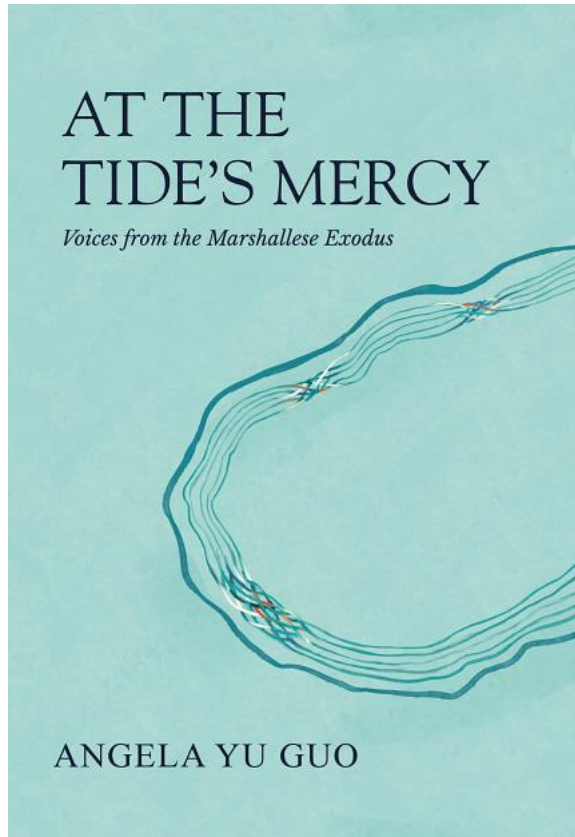
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An oral history of the Marshallese exodus, drawn from 145 surveys and 19 in-depth interviews across Majuro and Seattle. Through their testimonies, it traces how nuclear trauma, exile, and resilience shape a people's search for home.

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