



## Breaking the Shell: Voyaging from Nuclear Refugees to People of the Sea in the Marshall Islands

By Joseph H. Genz. Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press, 2018. 256 pp., illustrations, map, glossary, bibliography, index. ISBN 9780824867911 (hardback), 9780824867904 (paperback). US\$68.00 (hardback), US\$28.00 (paperback).

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**To cite this article:** Monica C. Labriola (2019) Breaking the Shell: Voyaging from Nuclear Refugees to People of the Sea in the Marshall Islands, *The Journal of Pacific History*, 54:4, 570-571, DOI: [10.1080/00223344.2019.1633091](https://doi.org/10.1080/00223344.2019.1633091)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/00223344.2019.1633091>



Published online: 27 Jun 2019.



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On 1 March 1954, the United States detonated the largest yielding weapon of its nuclear testing program. Conducted at Bikini Atoll in the Marshall Islands, site of 23 nuclear tests from 1946 to 1958, Operation Castle Bravo had devastating outcomes for Marshallese communities after winds carried radioactive ash to Rongelap (Rongelap), Utrök (Utrik), and Aelōñin Ae (Ailinginae) atolls. These and other impacts have been documented in works by Robert Kiste (1974), Stewart Firth (1987), Laurence Carucci (1997), Holly Barker (2013), and others. While these studies are significant for what they reveal about the devastation inflicted on generations of Marshall Islanders by nuclear testing and the myriad ways Marshallese communities have strived to rebuild in the decades since, none explores the links between nuclear testing and the decline of Marshallese navigation or contemporary efforts to revive the practice. Through the story of Captain Korent Joel's journey from nuclear victim to *ri-melo* (navigator) and apprentice Alson Kelen's endeavour to revitalize and preserve navigational knowledge for future generations, Joseph H. Genz's *Breaking the Shell* does just that.

The expression *ruprup jokur*, or 'breaking the [turtle] shell', refers to a navigator's passage from apprentice on the completion of a voyage at sea. The book documents Captain Korent's and Kelen's endeavours to not only complete this journey, but to 'break the shell' of possibilities for the reclamation of Indigenous knowledge. In the process, Genz reveals his commitment to collaboration with Marshallese communities and the empowerment of Marshallese voices and knowledge – and in turn 'breaks the shell' of typical Western anthropological research.

*Breaking the Shell* starts on Rongelap Atoll in 1959, with a young Korent Joel in the throes of training to become a navigator. Despite its contamination by radioactive fallout, the US government had returned Korent and his community to Rongelap two years earlier. There, Korent studied navigation informally with his grandfather at the site of an historic navigation training school, where geography and wave patterns come together to simulate 'how ocean swells transform in the vicinity of land' (p. 82), allowing students to learn unique Marshallese wave piloting techniques. Before long, Korent's grandfather and others started suffering from radiation sickness and decided it was too dangerous to remain on the atoll. Many from the community resettled on Kuwajleen (Kwajalein) and Mājro (Majuro) atolls, and Korent went on to have a successful career piloting government ships. As his training at Rongelap had neither been completed nor been sanctioned by an *irooj* (chief), Captain Korent kept his navigational knowledge secret. Years later, revitalization efforts among the Rongelap community and those in Hawai'i centered around *Hōkūle'a* inspired the captain to gain chiefly permission to work with Kelen and Genz to bring together Indigenous and Western approaches to revive Marshallese navigation. *Breaking the Shell* explores this journey, and in the process reveals the deep complexities surrounding protected Indigenous knowledge forms, contemporary revival efforts, tensions between Indigenous and outside knowledge, the position of outside researchers in Indigenous communities, and the challenges of and possibilities for cross-cultural collaboration in an era of decolonization.

The introduction outlines Genz's interdisciplinary, community-based approach inspired by Ben Finney and Katerina Teaiwa, Marshallese narrative and historiography, as well as Captain Korent's hope of merging Marshallese and outside scientific knowledge to further understand wave patterns and piloting. With careful attention to intersections and divergences in Marshallese and outside epistemologies, the first two chapters explore Marshallese origins, navigational knowledge, and maritime histories. Chapter one brings together Marshallese oral traditions and Western-inspired narratives to consider the cosmogonic and migratory origins of Marshall Islanders and the centrality of the ocean and voyaging in

Marshallese epistemology and daily life. Chapter two presents a maritime history that privileges Marshallese understandings of navigation and of Marshall Islanders as people of the sea. Chapter three looks at the impacts of more than a century of direct foreign imperialism on Marshallese voyaging and navigational knowledge, localized strategies to protect this knowledge, and the severe blow dealt to these efforts by US nuclear testing and the Bravo test in particular. Importantly, the chapter includes a brief section on the often-overlooked role of women in the founding and preservation of Marshallese navigational knowledge and practice.

Chapter four provides an overview of contemporary efforts to revitalize Marshallese navigation, including those spearheaded by Captain Korent and Alson Kelen, meanwhile acknowledging the inherent challenges of engaging with historically protected Indigenous knowledge forms. In chapter five, Genz brings together Marshallese and Western scientific concepts, maps, and models to examine wave piloting techniques unique to Marshallese navigation. The chapter includes detailed descriptions of wave patterns and current formations, an ethnographic survey of Marshallese mapping tools (commonly referred to in English as ‘stick charts’), and an overview of Genz’s collaboration with Captain Korent and University of Hawai’i oceanographers to use scientific data and computer simulations to map the swells and wave patterns Marshallese navigators have recognized for centuries. Chapters six and seven detail Captain Korent’s remarkable quest to become a sanctioned navigator through the successful completion of a *ruprup jokur* test, and Kelen’s determination to follow in Korent’s wake to become the next navigator able to safeguard Marshallese navigational knowledge for future generations.

Together, the chapters offer important and deeply engaging reflections on the challenges and possibilities of cultural revitalization in Oceania and the determination of Captain Korent, Kelen, and other ‘people of the sea’ to feel the waves and ‘break the shell’ of custom as they see necessary to pilot their communities and cultures into the future.

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/00223344.2019.1633091>

