

Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner. *Iep Jāltok: Poems from a Marshallese Daughter*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2017. 81 pp. ISBN: 9780816534029.

<https://uapress.arizona.edu/book/iep-jaltok>

Climate change; sea level rise; nuclear detonations; these are the topics commonly affiliated with the Marshall Islands in western popular media. But it is with the image of a basket that Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner weaves her personal and ancestral history of the Marshall Islands and asserts a textured narrative of grief but also resilience, empowerment, and hope. The Marshall Islands are an island nation in Micronesia that gained independence in 1979. With a long history of their islands being co-opted by foreign nations for different military purposes (military supply bases, airfields, bomb testing sites, etc.), the Marshallese live daily with the effects of colonialism. However, *Iep Jāltok*, the first book of poetry by a Marshallese writer to be printed by a United States press, powerfully charts a new course of Marshallese history *and* futurity. Indeed, the printing of the collection itself is now part of Marshallese survivance, as it gains a wider audience for the experiences that Jetnil-Kijiner documents. Readers of *Transmotion*, a journal inspired by the work of Gerald Vizenor who first gave scholars the important term “survivance,” may be assured that the spirit of that term pulses powerfully through this book.

This collection has four sections: *Iep Jāltok*, History Project, Lessons from Hawai‘i, and Tell Them. *Iep Jāltok* takes its name from a reference to Marshallese matrilineal society. The epigraph, which quotes the only Marshallese-English dictionary in print, explains that *iep jāltok* is “a basket whose opening is facing the speaker. Said of female children. She represents a basket whose contents are made available to her relatives.” Two concrete poems entitled “Basket” bookend the collection, while doubles are a theme in the first section. After the first “Basket” poem, the collection begins with two origin stories: those of Lōktanūr, a mother figure from Marshallese cosmology who introduced the Marshallese to the sail; and the sisters Liwātuonmour and Lidepdepju, who are viewed as the mothers of the chiefly lineage and represented as two sacred stones. Focusing on pairings, Jetnil-Kijiner asks her readers to question binaries so often associated with colonialism—modern/timeless, progressive/past, oppressor/oppressed, civilized/uncivilized, and colonizer/colonized. This first set of poems tell two histories: Lōktanūr—which is told in two parts, then Liwātuonmour and Lidepdepju—about two sacred stones; by using duality, she explores the defining characteristics of Marshallese society and values over time, giving Marshallese cosmologies due space against the influences of religious colonialism. In one of the poems, Jetnil-Kijiner retells the desecration of Lidepdepju (her stone was thrown into the sea by a western missionary); the form of these poems is striking, visually resembling a dictionary entry. Through form and content, each delineation of the terms reveals a fraught relationship over the place of origin stories in contemporary society—after independence, but also after the onset of colonialism.

The section History Project outlines the Marshallese interactions with and effects of western militarization. In the poem “Hooked,” Jetnil-Kijiner presents the story of a man who ultimately loses his limbs to diabetes after becoming addicted to fatty canned foods—foods that had only become introduced because the west’s use of the islands for warfare had decimated the local food supply and the islanders were forced to accept western preserved foods. Her critique of these subtle but destructive western influences continues in “The Letter B is For” which explains

the etymology of the Marshallese word “baam”—“as in / Kombaam ke? / Are you contaminated / with radioactive fallout?” (19). This chilling example of western militarism’s effects is a found poem, as the content of the verse is adopted from the Marshallese-English Dictionary’s sample sentences of the word. The effects of the bombs leave irrevocable traces on both language and body, and the corporeal influences continue in “Fishbone Hair” which tells of the loss of her niece from cancer. In this section’s central poem, “History Project,” Jetnil-Kijiñer integrates these personal and national histories, reminding the reader not only how the personal is politically powerful, but how the political is always personally felt. The poem explores Jetnil-Kijiñer’s childhood, when she explored the Marshallese history with western nuclear testing while completing a school history project competition. Through the inclusion of primary source quotations in italics, the poem mixes her personal experience of learning the history alongside the atrocities of western military negligence and the horrors of Marshallese familial destruction. The speaker’s project on nuclear detonations in the Marshall Islands “For the Good of Mankind” repeats the foreboding words of the United States military officer who, without a translator, convinced the chief of Bikini atoll to allow the testing of atomic weapons on the island, promising that their sacrifice would lead to “the end of all wars” (Keju-Johnson 15). By the end of the poem, when her project has been reviewed by the judges and is misunderstood, these detrimental miscommunications in which the Marshallese lose are repeated once again.

Perhaps best known from this collection is her poem “Dear Matafele Peinam,” which she performed in 2014 at the Opening Ceremony of the United Nations Secretary-General’s Climate Summit. This poem, in an apostrophe to her infant daughter, promises that she will fight to protect her from the foreboding messages about the threats that climate change and rising sea levels bring to their islands, asserting: “no one’s moving / no one’s losing / their homeland / no one’s gonna become / a climate change refugee” (71) But in the next stanza with a turn to the history project of the rest of her collection, she explains, “or should i say / no one else” (71). Once again Jetnil-Kijiñer instructs her audience on the history of the Pacific over the last two centuries—one of desecration, development, and displacement. She then switches her address to her fellow peoples of the Pacific: “to the Carteret Islanders of Papua New Guinea / and to the Taro Islanders of the Solomon Islands / I take this moment / to apologize to you / we are drawing the line / here” (71) In a turn to indigenous solidarity, she acknowledges that the threats of climate change expand beyond her family, beyond the Marshall Islands, and beyond the Pacific. In this rousing call to action, Jetnil-Kijiñer leaves her reader with images of resistance and protest, of solidarity and organizing: “and there are thousands / out on the street / marching with signs / hand in hand / chanting for change NOW / and they’re marching for you, baby / they’re marching for us” (72-73). It is no surprise that after Jetnil-Kijiñer’s performance of this poem at the United Nations, she was described as “the poet [who] brings world leaders to tears.”

This moving debut should be admired, relished, and read in classrooms far and wide. It provides a rich and detailed survey of Marshallese pasts, presents, and futures told through one insightful activist’s study of history, linked with her personal experiences. Through its intimate portraits of her own journeys and those of Pacific peoples, *Iep Jāltok* intertwines vulnerability with empowerment for an inspiring message of survivance. As Jetnil-Kijiñer expresses triumphantly in “Dear Matafele Peinam:”

we deserve
to do more

than just
survive
we deserve
to thrive. (73)

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Keju-Johnson, Darlene. "For the Good of Mankind." *Pacific Women Speak Out for Independence and Denuclearisation*. Zohl de Ishtar, Ed. Christchurch, NZ: The Raven Press, 1988.