

REVIEWS

Coral and Concrete: Remembering Kwajalein Atoll between Japan, America, and the Marshall Islands.

Greg Dvorak. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2018. 346 pages. ISBN-13: 978-0824855215 (Kindle edition).¹

Coral and Concrete tackles the multiple stories of Kwajalein, an atoll in the Marshall Islands in the Pacific Ocean. In the early 20th century, Kwajalein was part of the Japanese empire's nan'yō (south seas). A battlefield during the Asia-Pacific War where many soldiers of the Japanese died, it was a place which US forces later claimed. It became the site of US nuclear and missile tests during the Cold War, receiving an influx of American military servicemen, professionals, and their families. In the 1980s, the islanders who were displaced by the American Occupation sought to reclaim their land through the Homecoming Movement. At present, Kwajalein is part of the Republic of the Marshall Islands, which, along with the Federated States of Micronesia and the Republic of Palau, is in "free association" with the United States. Their Compact of Free Association provides the US with military authority on the islands, in return for economic assistance.²

The author, Greg Dvorak, uses the metaphors of coral and concrete to describe Kwajalein and, generally, the Asia-Pacific. As he explains, coral is "an analogy that is by its very nature Oceanic and multilayered" (loc. 433). These multilayered histories are pulverized, amalgamated, and flattened into "one condensed and monolithic mass"—i.e., concrete. "Nationalism and historical revisionism are examples of this" (loc. 886). Although they too are part of Asia-Pacific history, monolithic masses silence stories, stories which the book endeavors to exhume. By bringing numerous disconnected narratives back into the larger collective narrative of the Kwajalein, *Coral and Concrete* "re-members" the dismembered histories of the atoll. Without claiming to present a comprehensive picture, the book vividly depicts a diverse and complex Kwajalein.

After the Prelude introducing Kwajalein and the author (an American scholar who spent his childhood on the island, returned to the US, and has been based in Japan for years), chapter one explains the conceptual framework. Chapter two examines maps to introduce the multiple histories of the atoll: those of the Japanese *nan'yō*, the US Pacific empire, and the Marshallese Islanders. Afterward, chapter three explores Japanese “mythologies” (i.e., beliefs) about Kwajalein while the fourth chapter narrates the experiences of the Japanese and the islanders during the final stages of the Asia-Pacific War, ending with the author’s reflection of what he sees in the Marshall Islands, in Japan, and in the histories that he knows. Shifting to the US perspective, chapter five examines photos to glean common themes that contribute to the American liberation narrative. Returning to the Japanese perspective, chapter six discusses Japanese memories (“spirits”) that remained in Kwajalein and connected the island to the bereaved families in Japan. The next chapters, seven and eight, focus on the dislocations of the islanders after the Asia-Pacific War and on the protest movement, Operation Homecoming. The last chapter features the people who feel connected to the atoll: the American kids who grew up in “Kwaj,” “the bereaved families of the Japanese war dead,” and the Marshallese islanders struggling to reclaim their land (loc. 5211). As Dvorak stylistically writes, their “histories are like the islets of an atoll that seem separate but are really connected by reefs hidden in the shallow froth of the violent waves that crash between them” (loc. 5354).

The success of the book can be attributed to its consideration of diverse stories—from the large histories of imperial expansion and social movements to the individual stories of those who lived them. It was able to both criticize racist visions of empires and humanize its participants; to write with respect the islanders’ fight for their land without essentializing the struggle into the Islander-Colonizer dichotomy. For example, the author is severely critical of the US liberation grand narrative (chapter five) as well as of the missile tests, its accompanying cordoning of large sections of the land, and the displacement of islanders from their homes (chapters seven and

eight). However, he also writes about the Americans who find themselves in the atoll—himself and his family included—as humans. Many times, they are ignorant of the meanings of the apparently exotic objects they held (e.g., the *nishshōki* Japanese flag in chapter five) or of the state of the islanders whose home they came to inhabit. They are caught up in their own “mythologies;” nevertheless, the author treats them as people who came to view “Kwaj” as their home and, more importantly, built real connections with the islanders they met.

Likewise, the Marshallese islanders’ continuing struggle to reclaim their land and stories are told with due recognition, yet the book goes beyond the narrative of a precolonial indigenous people wrongfully displaced by an external power and now taking back what they had lost. “What seemed to some like a battle against the United States was actually a battle between Marshall Islanders over land and power that had been going on long before Japanese or Americans, or Spanish or Germans, landed at Kwajalein” (loc. 4401). Essentializing history into the Islanders on the one hand and the US empire on the other misses out the complexities within and connections between the islanders and the empire. By using the metaphor of coral and the concept of atollscape, the book brings out these complexities.

As someone researching about Davao (a southern Philippine province)—a similarly diverse locality with complex and multiple histories—I appreciate Dvorak’s approach. While I acknowledge that Davao was developed by Japanese businesses in the early 20th century, I cannot equate it with the Japanese imperial “Dabao-kuo,” as if a Japanese community was all it was. Histories framed by the Empire-Colony dichotomy, and those that lump people into monolithic masses of “Filipino,” “Japanese,” “Indigenous Peoples” without acknowledging that these are but monolithic masses and that coralline sediments traverse them, risk flattening the place and obliterating its complexity. For its thoughtful treatment of historical movements alongside individual stories, Dvorak’s book is a must-read not only for those interested on the Kwajalein but also for those wanting to understand Asia-Pacific.

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Endnotes

- 1 The review first appeared in my blog, Towards an Interconnected Pacific funded by Waseda University's Grant-in-Aid for Research Base Creation, <https://www.jajabarriga.com/post/coral-and-concrete-dvorak-2018>. It has been edited for publication in the journal.
- 2 Although this provision on military authority is the most salient to the book's topic, the Compact has other significant and well-discussed provisions. For instance, Pacific Islanders from the three aforementioned Pacific states may freely live and work in the US without a visa.