

# “Music as Method” in Marshallese Community-driven Research & Outreach during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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**Abstract** This essay centers on the sound- and music-based methodologies of the Marshallese Educational Initiative (MEI) in terms of “community-driven research” that began in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic when the virus was taking a massive toll on the community. The MEI is a nonprofit based in Springdale, Arkansas, which is home to the largest diasporic Marshallese community in the continental US. The first part analyzes the MEI’s COVID-19 informational materials on their website from an audiovisual perspective. Although mitigating the day-to-day consequences of COVID-19 took a necessary priority, the MEI educational programmers were determined to examine the long-term consequences of social distancing (as community disenfranchisement) in a transpacific context and the negative media representation of Marshallese regarding COVID-19 cases. Consequently, they came up with a project called “Songs of Our Atolls,” that would facilitate intergenerational communication and combat negative stereotyping. The second part explores the “Songs” project from its inception to grant application to realization through the activism of Marshallese youth musicians (MARK Harmony). Based on interviews and my remote participation, I examine the studio-based outreach to elders through which the band engaged in conversations and intergenerational learning (through songs) in ways that maintained social proximity while keeping physical distance in culturally appropriate ways. The third part offers a critical assessment of potential directions for the “Songs” project, including bidirectional learning, that dovetails with part one of the essay, whereby the band would work on collaborative public service announcements with other youths and elders, which is a method inspired by Youth to Youth in Health (an organization in the Marshall Islands). My conclusion sums up the ethical importance of paying attention to sound and music in terms of communal health and situating these transpacific forms of culturally appropriate information dissemination and intergenerational learning in the broader diaspora.

## Introduction

This essay focuses on “music as method” or the musical- and sound-based methodologies of the Marshallese Educational Initiative (MEI) in terms of “community-driven research” (Smith 2003; Pandya 2014; McElfish 2015; Beveridge 2020) at the core of the “community-based participatory research” (CBPR) strategies that began in the context of the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. The MEI is a nonprofit based in Springdale, Arkansas. It was founded in 2013 as the first nonprofit in the US with a dedicated focus on Marshallese issues and empowerment through intercultural efforts, and is now led and predominantly staffed by Marshallese employees. The MEI has been pivotal in advancing opportunities for the community’s political mobilization, educational advancement, employment options, and access to health care and medical information, especially for non-English speakers. As such, it has consistently employed CBPR approaches in ways that prioritized both the needs of the diasporic community and humanistic research through initiatives that highlighted co-learning processes. The staff of the MEI worked tirelessly to secure funding and resources to help the community from the beginning of the pandemic, and a central part of their efforts revolved around public service announcements (PSAs) outreach (information dissemination and media content curation). The nonprofit also aimed to promote cohesion through humanities-based cultural programming as the climate of increased racism and hostility against Asian American and Pacific Islander communities in the US exacerbated experiences of pain, illness, community fragmentation, and loss from COVID-19.

COVID-19 took a massive toll on the Marshallese diasporic community in the US. Northwest Arkansas (e.g., Springdale, Bentonville), which is home to the largest diasporic Marshallese community (15,000+) in the continental US, particularly saw the Marshallese community suffering from the outset of the pandemic. According to an *Arkansas Democrat Gazette* article, “Marshallese [were] contracting [and] dying from COVID-19 at [a] disproportionate rate [...] [making] up no more than 3% of the Northwest Arkansas population, but [...] [suffering] half of covid-19 deaths so far in the region” (Thompson & Golden 2020). Dr. Sheldon Riklon, a Marshallese family practice physician and University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences (UAMS) researcher, not-

ed that the reasons for the inequitable toll the pandemic exacted on the Marshallese community are many: struggles with medical care, underlying health conditions, such as diabetes and high blood pressure, lack of health insurance and Medicaid resulting from unemployment and other factors, and the reluctance to see a doctor or go to the hospital (Thompson & Golden 2020; McElfish et al. 2021)<sup>1</sup>. Barriers – cultural, language, financial, and systemic – have rendered the community vulnerable.

Vulnerabilities faced by the Marshallese also result from centuries of colonization, US imperialism, militarism (including nuclear weapons testing and radiological studies), modernization with the importation of Americanized foodstuffs (contributing to the high rates of diabetes), and the devaluation of Marshallese labor, land, and lives. Many islanders have been forced to move from their ancestral homelands in the northern-central Pacific as the archipelago has become increasingly uninhabitable through centuries of ecocide and environmental toxification, including the US nuclear weapons program (1946–1958) through which Marshallese people and their homelands became subject to US radiation studies, including classified radiation experimentation on human beings that was done without the knowledge or consent of participants. The medical and scientific experimentation contributed greatly to the Marshallese distrust of the US medical establishment. A lack of trust remains, even though Marshallese out-migrated from the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) to Springdale, Arkansas, for educational, employment, and health care (quality of life) opportunities<sup>2</sup>. The diasporic population in Springdale grew substantially as international corporations with local headquarters in Northwest Arkansas, such as Tyson Foods, offered jobs to Marshallese that would enable them a (relatively) consistent income and proximity to their families. Moreover, climate change is rendering the archipelago uninhabitable. The Marshall Islands are low-lying coral atolls and individual islands, and global warming and the rise in sea level have caused massive flooding in some parts of the country and severe droughts in other parts.

It is particularly important, I argue, to focus on the sound- and music-centered methodologies that arise from CBPR at the onset and throughout the trajectory of the pandemic, because these methodologies amplify the importance of attentional artistic and humanistic work. The arts and humanities afford different modalities of *life-sustaining* and *-affirming connection* during periods of time when medical and scientific research and remedy

are given societal and academic precedence. Given the generally disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on Marshallese in Arkansas, and, more particularly, given the pandemic’s toll on older adults (especially those with comorbidities), Marshallese-driven media projects help to answer humanistic inquiries about how creative forms of communication – here, specifically, music and sound – can be implemented to strengthen bonds between elders and youth that have been strained in the diaspora given the demands placed on both the old and young. Culturally specific ways of bonding are embedded with knowledge, practices, and skills that can effect health and healing during and beyond the pandemic. Given the colonial foundations that structure pandemic inequity for racialized communities, I will share how treating music methodologically in terms of a CBPR approach might also be understood in a decolonial context – one that retains Indigenous self-determined modes of educational sharing, such as the Marshallese concept of *jitdam kapeel* (“seeking knowledge guarantees wisdom”), which is the motto of the College of the Marshall Islands in Majuro (RMI).

The first part of this essay develops the framework of “music as method” (Bolden 2017) CBPR in the context of the Marshallese diasporic community at the outset of the pandemic and analyzes the MEI’s COVID-19 informational materials on their website from an audiovisual perspective. Although mitigating the day-to-day consequences of COVID-19 took a necessary priority, the MEI educational programmers were determined to examine the long-term consequences of social distancing (as community disenfranchisement) in a transpacific context as well as the negative media representation of Marshallese regarding COVID-19 cases. To this end, the MEI came up with a project, “Songs of Our Atolls,” that would facilitate intergenerational communication and combat negative stereotyping. The second part of this essay explores the “Songs” project from its inception through grant application to realization through the activism of Marshallese youth musicians (MARK Harmony). Based on interviews and my remote participation, I examine the studio-based outreach to elders through which the band engaged in conversations and intergenerational learning (through songs) in ways that maintained a social proximity while keeping a physical distance in culturally appropriate ways. Based on my interviews, I then discuss some of the meaningful songs in a subsection, “Intergenerational Currency.” The third part of this essay offers a critical assessment of potential ‘future directions’ for the “Songs” pro-

ject, including community-centered co-learning (bidirectional learning) that dovetails with “Part I” of the essay, whereby the band worked on collaborative PSAs. It returns to the question of educational self-determination as a decolonial method by revisiting the historical roots of generational fragmentation. My conclusion sums up the ethical importance of CBPR in the arts and humanistic research, particularly in terms of health humanities. I review how CBPR enables the most vulnerable in the community to build healing (as both individuals and community) by creating embodied, epistemological bridges through sound, voice, language, music, and song as intergenerational learning in the broader diaspora.

## **Part 1: “Music as method”**

### **MEI outreach in the context of COVID-19**

The substance [of a song] is emotional, but beyond that, spiritual, and it’s real and you are present in, and part of it [...] A song is made substantial by its context—that is its reality, both that which is there and what is brought about by the song. (King et al 2015, Ortiz 2003:204)

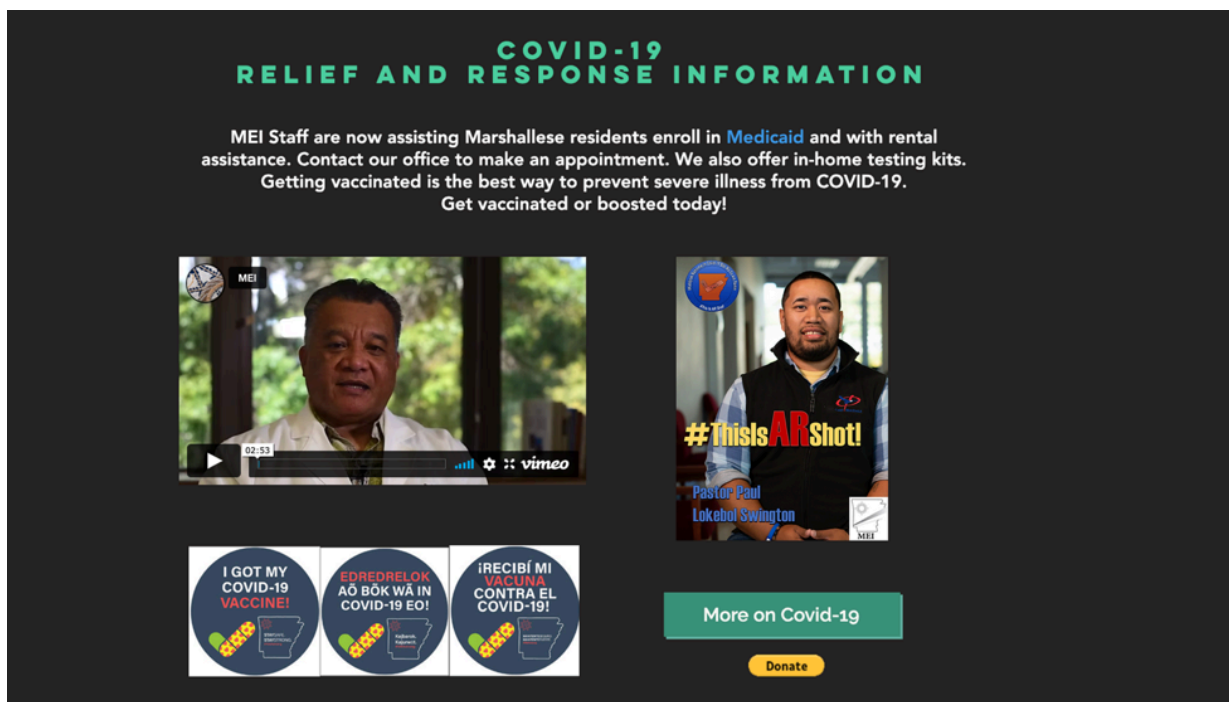
Songs can be formed at the interstices of many contexts; in fact, songs are processes that transform substantially as they are passed down and otherwise shared. COVID-19 became an important context for the Marshallese songs performed and learned during the “Songs of Our Atolls” project through which they became methodologically substantial. In other words, “Songs of Our Atolls” treats “music as method.” Benjamin Bolden (2017) proffered the “rich” opportunities afforded by music-centered research in his article “Music as Method: Musically Enhanced Narrative Inquiry.” “Perhaps most significant in the consideration of music as a method for researching is the notion that it can impart what other forms of communication cannot,” he surmised (*ibid.*). “According to Heinrich Heine, ‘where words leave off, music begins.’ Music has the potential to enable ways of knowing, illuminating, representing and communicating that are simply not available to other modalities” (Heine cited in Bolden 2017). Building on this understanding of music as a unique pedagogical tool to illuminate stories better, Bolden developed a method called “musically enhanced narrative inquiry,” the idea of which “is inspired by the notion that, through music and sound, it may be possible to explore, reveal and communicate meanings oth-

erwise ignored – that sound and music may enhance the potential of narrative to engender resonance and empathic understanding” (2017). While Bolden composed music to thematically realize teachers’ narratives, “musically enhanced narrative inquiry” is a relatively straightforward concept that can 1) help unpack the layers of “music as method,” 2) advance an understanding of why the community-driven approach of “Songs of Our Atolls” could be so effective in rebuilding communal health during the pandemic, and 3) assist in the dynamic conceptualization of future directions for the project.

The context of the COVID-19 pandemic required shifts in energy, time, and focus. Trying to get utilities paid and funeral costs covered alongside creating PSAs to mitigate the results of generational, systemic health disparities (more severe illness and deaths) took precedence over the MEI’s consistent target: increasing educational attainment for the Marshallese community. The nonprofit points to the fact that low educational attainment is identified as one of the key social determinants of health and linked to economic instability, and, in turn, limited access to quality nutrition, medical care, and housing. Both Marshallese and non-Marshallese researchers have been invested in questions around critical pedagogies since the organization’s founding. Namely, what are the culturally appropriate, viable, and inspired modes and means of educational support that can help Marshallese youth advance in traditional educational routes, while also becoming stakeholders in their educational pathways (i.e., bringing their knowledge, as Marshallese, to bear on subject matter across disciplines and educational levels, from grade school to higher education)? Such questions became all the more dire in the wake of the pandemic as many Marshallese youths and their families found themselves more susceptible due to heightened economic instability resulting from increased costs incurred, inability to work due to health or family responsibilities (time off work, termination), and, as a longer-term consequence, gaps in educational attainment with the shuttering of schools.

Dr. April Brown (MEI Cofounder and COO) and Chris Jacobs (MEI President of the Board of Directors) were at the MEI office in Springdale in March 2020. Jacobs retrieved a Center for Disease Control (CDC) flyer from online that listed the three main symptoms of COVID-19, and he translated it, put it up on Facebook, and then the two decided to shut the office doors. Brown, on behalf of the MEI, added the COVID-19 page to the website early on in the pandemic for informational purposes for the Marshallese and

non-Marshallese communities to share what the nonprofit had been doing. They had been translating flyers for the Marshallese community and were putting content on Facebook, which became the first place of dissemination given that many in the Marshallese community are apt to view Facebook rather than a website for a primary means of communication. Facebook also allowed the MEI to put information up in a timely manner during a time when information about the pandemic was rapidly changing. As the pandemic went on, the webpage grew to include PSA-style videos that aimed to help the community understand the symptoms, know what to do in case someone was experiencing them, and encourage mask wearing. It then shifted to information about vaccines. It also included a GoFundMe page used to raise private donations for personal protective equipment and utility assistance, and to inform and update a national audience.



**Figure 1.** Excerpted content from the MEI COVID-19 page on the MEI Homepage (MEI, 2022).

Brown recounted MEI's pivotal work in pandemic organizing. She explained that in early March, before COVID made its way to Arkansas:

we were hearing about it in the meatpacking plants in different parts of the country [...] and we knew just it was just a matter of time [...] I was talking to one of our board members, and I said, 'You know we really need to do something, we all need to work together to try to meet this, because this is going

to be really bad.’ And she said, ‘You know you need a task force’, and I was like, yeah, you are right, so I called Eldon [Alik], the [RMI] Consul General after I hung up the phone with her and said, ‘Look, we need a task force. And you need to lead it.’ So, that got going in March, and it was really good that Eldon was leading it because he reached out to the poultry industry, he reached out to the medical industry, and we met once a week [for about 1.5–2 hours on] Monday nights. There were representatives from the major hospitals [and] representatives from the major poultry plants [...] community organizations like Legal Aid (A. Brown, personal communication, 6 August 2022).

The task force became a central, virtual gathering place where the main issues and needs of the community could be shared, addressed, and solutions could be proposed. Video-based information dissemination was part of the many ways that the MEI worked to support the community (food drives, funeral costs, utilities). As the MEI’s website offers, “MEI’s COVID-19 educational videos in Marshallese (Kiribati other PI languages to come) have been supported, in part, by grants from Made to Save/Ark Community Foundation (current) and the University of Oklahoma/CDC Foundation, CARES Act funding, Tyson Foods, and private donations” (MEI 2022). The MEI Media Specialist, Richard Laraya, shot and produced the majority of the videos, including the editorial and sound design work, and he integrated stock footage from some of the vaccine events in which the MEI participated. The videos include featured speakers, such as Pastor Paul Swington (MEI Board of Directors), Consul General Eldon Alik, and Dr. Sheldon Riklon, who speak in Marshallese. Pastor Tiree Mangang has an informational video on the vaccine in the Kirabati (Gilbertese) language and Rin Fareway offered a vaccine PSA in the Chuukese language. The “I Wear a Mask” PSA was done by April. She had everyone send in photos of themselves wearing masks and then set the photos on PowerPoint slides with Richard doing the musical accompaniment. Richard also created the logo for “This is AR Shot,” which features band-aids with the Arkansas razorback hog on it. The logos are based on the colors of the RMI and US flags (red, white, orange, and blue).





**Figure 2.** This is AR Shot Graphic.

The educational videos and PSAs complement the CDC informational sheets, translated into the Marshallese language (per above), and the “Fact Sheets” provided by UAMS, which have also been translated into the Marshallese language. These infographics contain the necessary protocol to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 (e.g., identification of symptoms, social distancing, washing hands, and the importance of staying home when ill). Some of the CDC and UAMS materials are in both the English and Marshallese languages on the website, including “Pregnancy and COVID-19.” The UAMS had developed a CBPR Team, including MEI representation, to address the health disparities of the pandemic, from which some of the infographics were produced. The team developed “a COVID-19 Comprehensive Response Plan with four interrelated components to ensure coordinated effort for Marshallese testing, contact tracing, enhanced case management, and health education” (McElfish et al. 2021)<sup>3</sup>. Although richly illustrated, the print-based educational materials convey a lot of information through the written word, even if abbreviated in outline/bullet-point fashion, they still require general and health literacy.

The MEI educational videos Richard produced were accompanied by soundtracks. I reached out to Richard and asked why he chose to use music in these videos. He first explained that he used the soundtrack created by

Aleksandr Shamaluev to accompany the PSAs (AShamaluevMusic 2022). He wrote in an email correspondence that he finds that video and music direct and help sustain “audiences’ attention” to the informational messages. He offered

Why I chose the music? I felt that creating a video itself without music doesn’t draw close attention to what is being importantly delivered in the video, so by adding the soundtrack it does make a complete change. I added the music because I see the opposite side of watching something plain does make it boring, then I did upgrade my game to where I can create a[n] informational video that is exciting to watch, people can pay attention too, don’t have to skip, also to feel and understand the environment that is happening in the video (R. Laraya, personal communication, 8 August 2022).

Richard then suggested another potential reason why the musically accompanied videos have been impactful: the community’s preference to consume information via audiovisuals rather than the written word.”<sup>4</sup> I thought providing an educational video will help deliver the most important messages that they need to know and understand. I probably have over thousands of views on every video I created” (R. Laraya, personal communication, 8 August 2022). Here, music provides a method aimed at attentional increase. And, while the relatively high number of views might have something to do with literacy issues in the community, I surmise that the videos feel more personal and oriented toward the Marshallese community. The music is engaging and, when coupled with Marshallese voices (coming from Marshallese people, primarily, on the screen) in motion, there is the sense that the community is coming together in pursuit of protection, taking care, and healing. The informational sheets use stock footage or generic characters visually representing all backgrounds, and they are still – there is no motion, no coming together. The narratives in print are without a soundtrack that de-temporizes the task of information gathering (as does the music in Richard’s work) and makes it more about the experience of learning from family, as it were, especially during a time when the family feels out of reach and fragmented. The educational videos and PSAs, especially with the music that carries them, feel community-driven (toward togetherness, which is a pre-eminent value in Marshallese culture). They are all the more important given vaccine hesitancy and the “Marshallese distrust [of] health care providers and researchers” (McElfish et al. 2021; Willis et al. 2021).

Additionally, the MEI's COVID-19 information page directs viewers to "Visit MEI's COVID-19 PSA showcase!" and takes them to a Vimeo page where there are additional video shorts. Three PSAs not featured on the main page stand out. They are from the Marshallese youth band, MARK Harmony (of Springdale, AR), and two of the individual members of the band, Arsi Lokot and Matthew John, who were the two featured youth PSAs.

The "MARK Harmony COVID-19 Safety Guidelines" (December 2020, MEI) lasts three and a half minutes and features "MARK Harmony, local Marshallese singers, deliver[ing] a friendly reminder to the Marshallese community about following the health and safety guidelines" (MEI 2020). The skit is spoken in the English language with Marshallese subtitles, and it closes with an *a cappella* take on the melody of Bobby McFarren's "Don't Worry Be Happy" with the lyrics "Make sure to follow safety guidelines (ooo, ooo), please wear your mask (ooo, ooo), and don't touch your face (your face). Stay safe!"

Arsi Lokot's video, from June 2021, focuses on the vaccine. It begins with Arsi relaying his love for "jamming" with his band, and videos of the band hanging out together and making music are interspersed. He focuses on his craft and how much time it takes to work on his musicianship, particularly with his bandmates. He related:

When COVID happened, everything changed. With the band, it affected us big time because we were supposed to be on tour [...] but after the pandemic became getting worse, we had to ease up a bit. We had to hold off on projects because we thought they were unsafe. For the safety of all our families we have to hold off on this project and do it later. It was sad, but things take time.

Arsi shifts to COVID-based methods. "We did everything virtually," he recounted. "On Zoom, we made plans. We had meetings." The video shows footage of these meetings. Then it shifts to the vaccination process and Arsi's fear of needles. He pushed through, with the support of the MEI, he relayed, and got the shot (even though he had to lay down afterwards). "I got my shot," he exclaims making muscle arm gestures. "Now, you get yours. Sheesh!" he laughs, pointing in needle fashion to his bicep, signaling the end of the video.

Matthew John's PSA, from May 2021, shows him positioned with an acoustic guitar in hand (capo on the sixth fret). He begins by sharing how he is one of the "captains" of MARK Harmony, and how he likes music, anime, and video games. He then segues into the impacts of COVID-19 on his family, how his mom has a weakened immune system and how his band had to

do their projects over Zoom until after they were vaccinated. He emphasizes the importance of youth to take the vaccine to protect all those around them and themselves, confessing that he was nervous about the vaccine (since it was his first vaccine) but that he went ahead anyway knowing it would be for the community as well. As he talks, the guitar music plays in the background and clips of him playing and singing are woven into the video, connecting his multiple modes of communication. With the next mention of the vaccine, the guitar music drops into a contemplative silence, and the viewer sees a needle going into an arm to the left of Matthew’s now still guitar, and he speaks about waiting two weeks to hug his grandparents post-vaccine, and the visual switches to a picture of him and his grandparents – the montage places all of the things close, near, and dear to Matthew in proximity to the vaccine (specifically, the act of getting the vaccine). Matthew then explains how he will continue to wear his mask, even post-vaccine, to protect others since he might be unknowingly carrying COVID-19. We see Matthew holding up his vaccine card and telling people to get their shot, and now the guitar music that had turned silence has morphed again into quotidian sounds of wind and dogs barking in the background. The video ends with Matthew performing a song on his guitar, “Take Your Shot.”<sup>5</sup>

## **Part 2: “Songs of Our Atolls”**

“Songs of Our Atolls” was proposed by the MEI cofounder, Dr. April Brown toward the end of summer, beginning of Fall in 2020 when the pandemic crisis, although far from over, was not nearly as acute as it had been in June and July 2020. It is one of the MEI’s Humanities Initiatives. The latter have been developed to creatively engage Marshallese youth in culturally specific, critical knowledge-as-skill building, appreciation, and application through co-learning activities (e.g., in workshops) with researchers from a variety of identities and backgrounds. The project can be situated in a long line of the MEI’s foundational educational projects that hone in on storytelling, musical, and voice-based pedagogies: the Marshallese Oral History Project (MOHP) and Digital Music Archive, “Challenging Voices: Re-Listening to Marshallese Histories of the Present,” and the blueprint for “Mapping Aelōñ Kein Ad: Marshallese Culture Through Music (an Online Experience)” multimedia music project, to name but a few.<sup>6</sup> Developed in an intercultural capacity to con-

nect the Marshallese community through cultural sharing, these positioned song, story, voice, and oral history as the glue to hold the youth's interest as they developed vocational/technical skills (e.g., conduct or film oral histories, transcription) and built knowledge of their histories and cultures. From these projects, MEI researchers (again, Marshallese and non-Marshallese) presented our research inquiries and initiatives around educational equity, accessibility, and attainment in academic conferences, individually and collectively, and in publications. When we talked, Brown explained that she did not want to let the humanistic work that has been central to the MEI's mission fall by the wayside, as is indicated on the website, "MEI is committed to our mission to promote intercultural dialogue and offer educational and cultural programming, especially in light of stark inequities made clear by the impact of the pandemic" (MEI 2022).

Brown, on behalf of the MEI collective, applied for and received sponsorship from the Bridge Fund Program of the Creative Arkansas Community Hub & Exchange (CACHE) at the Northwest Arkansas Council during the second round of funding, which, as the website states, was supported through a grant from the Walton Family Foundation, [and] provides the support for organizations to develop long-term strategies around operations, infrastructure and creative production in response to the ongoing and dramatic changes within the arts and culture sector due to COVID-19 (Cache 2022).

Our community members rarely frequent local art and cultural venues because we do not see ourselves reflected in them. Instead of being viewed as a people with rich Oceanic traditions, we and other Islanders are often defined by what we lack: wealth, English language skills, access to healthy foods, and now with the coronavirus pandemic, we (along with other communities of color) are viewed as victims disproportionately affected by covid-19.

As more Marshallese children are born in Northwest Arkansas, our youth become further detached from our traditional ways of being and doing. Traditionally, our youth learn *manit* (Marshallese culture) from our grandparents by asking questions and listening to stories (*jiidam kapeel*, which is the motto of the College of the Marshall Islands in Majuro, RMI and translates to “seeking knowledge guarantees wisdom”). We have a saying about those who know their *manit*: as a youth they lay their head on the shoulder of their *bubu* or *jimma* (grandma, grandpa). Here that close connection often does not exist.

Youth feel disconnected from their *manit* and struggle with depression and knowing their place in society. Our elders also feel isolated. In Majuro, elders would walk to and gather at their community center, where they would talk story, or *buebuenato*. Here they live spread out across the city and lament how the youth increasing do “not know their *manit*”. Elders have approached MEI staff and asked if we could build a community center where they can gather, and provide transportation. They also expressed their desire to share their knowledge with the youth and have asked us to facilitate this as well.

As an organization whose mission is to promote our culture and facilitate intercultural dialogue, one of our objectives is to open a brick-and-mortar *Alele Arkansas*, a Marshallese Cultural and Community Center, a mixed-use facility that houses a museum, gathering space, and classrooms. Named after the *alele*, a Marshallese basket filled with important items that link each Marshallese to their lands and matrilineal lineages, this facility will serve as a shared, intergenerational space and will help our community feel like we are part of the NWA cultural landscape.

In line with this ultimate long-term goal of opening Alele Arkansas, and building off our Arkansas Alele Online (AAO) project, “Songs of Our Atolls” will bring our youth and elders together to preserve Marshallese songs and stories. MEI will facilitate a series of three 1-1/2-hour *buebuenato* sessions (Feb-March 2021) with elders and members of the popular, local Marshallese youth singing group, MARK Harmony. Elders will share songs important to their home atolls as well as the stories behind them. MEI will video record the sessions that will be held at the JTL library [Center for Nonprofits @ the JTL/Jones Truck Line Shop], a location that allows for social distancing. If an in-person session is deemed too risky due to covid, MEI will facilitate a zoom session. MEI staff will assist MARK Harmony with the transcription and translation process and the recording of songs and performances either at the TASC [Teen Action and Support Center] recording studio or the Springdale School District’s studio and potentially borrow equipment from CACHE’s Equipment Lending Library. MEI staff will edit the music videos and excerpts from the original *buebuenato* sessions, which will be uploaded to the AAO website as part of the 2<sup>nd</sup> virtual exhibit and made available to the public.

Additionally, MEI will host a two-hour zoom workshop in April 2021 between MARK Harmony and select Marshallese Youth and ethnomusicologist Jessica Schwartz (UCLA), a Marshallese music specialist, to explore what it means to be a community in diaspora and to think critically about the concept of tradition. Such a workshop is important to begin a process of analyzing and claiming their identity as Marshallese youth in NWA, as well as serve as a test model of engagement for future funding opportunities.

**Figure 3.** Expanded Reproduction of CACHE Application (Brown 2020).

Benetick Kabua Maddison, now the MEI’s Executive Director, was instrumental in bringing the project, the elders, and youth musicians together, as was Marcina Langrine, the MEI’s Program Manager & ESG Coordinator (Emergency Solutions Grant), who was the manager of MARK Harmony. Thus, Benetick, Marcina, and Richard Laraya, along with Brown, were the main MEI staff that contributed to the project. The Marshallese youth brought in to learn through engaged listening, questioning, and performing the songs shared by the elders were the members of MARK Harmony: Matthew John, Arsi Lokot, Regan Jacklick, and Kairo Langrus. At the start of the project, MARK Harmony had a modest repertoire, playing some original but mostly cover songs (frequently the Beatles, John Lennon) at shows.

The elders – Shine Benkim, Pastor Aister Reklen, and his wife Mina Reklen – had been working with the MEI on other projects, such as MOHP. The participants opted to wait until late February to early March 2021 to begin studio work since transcribing and translating the initial interviews was time-consuming, and because COVID-19 cases began to rise once again in the winter months. The recordings took place at the Teen Action and Support Center, where Matthew worked as the recording studio director. There was the sense that the recording and reciprocal learning – where the elders sang the songs and shared stories and the youth shared their technological apti-

tude – might have to be paused at any minute given the unpredictable nature of the pandemic.

The elders sang a number of songs, such as “Aelōñ in Jalooj” (“Jaluit Atoll”), “Ejemlōk Pād Eo Ad” (“Our Time Together Is Done”), “Ij Iakwe Lōk Aelōñ Eo Ao” (“I Love My Atoll”), “Joto Jotak” (“The Boat Sways”), conveyed as a song and twentieth-century chant, “Ke Jinō Ear Ba Nān Eō” (“When My Mother Told Me”), “Oh, Jabōnkōnnaan” (“Oh, Proverb”), and “Typhoon in Jaluit.” The elders would sit with the members of MARK Harmony and the MEI staff (who were in their twenties) to discuss the songs once they recorded them. They were encouraged to “bwebwenato” or “talk story” about their contributions. In an approximation of jitdam kapeel, the youth were able to ask questions, and since some of the youth are neither able to understand nor fluent in the Marshallese language, Benetick would translate the questions and responses. The collective team would glean their song descriptions from the bwebwenato, answers to questions, and the lyrics.





**Figure 4.** The Elders in the Recording Studio: (from L to R) Mina Aister, Shine Benkim, Pastor Aister Reklen (Photo taken by April L. Brown)

After the songs had been transcribed, they were translated and performed (recorded) by the youth. The material was learned in multiple sessions and the recordings enabled the MEI staff, particularly Benetick, to spend time with MARK Harmony members afterwards, paying attention to the song material through transcription and translation. Matthew John discussed the process with me, stating that he appreciated Benetick’s method of having the youth go through the *Marshallese-English Dictionary* (MED) to learn the standard orthography and multiple meanings in lyrical-musical context as they translated the songs and transcribed them.

The process, I’m not gonna lie, was very challenging, but it was still like I was still 100 % engaged – if not 110 % – because it’s about figuring out who we are, where we come from, and building a connection with the elders [...] it was very hard. I didn’t understand most of what they were saying and whenever they did explain it to me, they explained it into depth, so they made me understand. So that made everything a lot easier, but the beginning of the process was very challenging and I feel like overcoming those obstacles helped



me grow and, um, it just made me hungry, like really hungry to learn more and more [...] In this process, Kairo and I, we both had Marshallese dictionaries pulled up to translate the words for us that we didn't understand. Benetick would sit [with us] and tell us that Marshallese words have different meanings. He would tell us [...] 'make sure that when you read the sentence that it makes sense with which word you're using.' We had like a couple of sentences where [it could be one meaning or the other and] Benetick would read it, and [...] he would want us to like figure it out [to the 'best of' our 'ability'] and learn as we're going, and that was definitely challenging but it was worth it, and I see why he was doing it that way (M. John, personal communication, August 8, 2022).

The Marshallese language is a context-specific language, and songs prove all the more complicated because of the poetics employed. Benetick's method of active listening and repeated iterations of contextualizing words paired with his utilization of the MED is an important consideration of "music as method" CBPR. Benetick has been concerned about Marshallese language skills, specifically among the youth in the United States. Benetick is the coordinator of the Marshallese Youth Academy and, consequently, focused on Marshallese language acquisition as a top priority. Moreover, he was a participant of the MOHP, and understood the challenges of transcription and translation due to the many variants of Marshallese orthographic transcription from what is considered "missionary orthography" (nineteenth century) to the "standard orthography" (1976 – present). Not only do the different writing systems complicate meanings, they can often obfuscate meanings entirely, especially when we consider the "missionary orthography" as part of a larger process of colonization via missionization, which I will further unpack in Part 3.

Benetick presented at the Pacific Coast Branch of the American Historical Association conference in 2016 on the importance of using the MED as a standard because the sounds of Marshallese frame the text. Many prominent Marshallese politicians and public figures have lauded the text's orthographic attention to sound. Benetick gave an example concerning the word "atoll." When spoken in Marshallese, it is written as "ailin" (missionary orthography) versus "aelōñ" (MED orthography). The former sounds like "island," which then conflates "island" or what from a North Atlantic perspective is often perceived as an isolated (often small) piece of land with "atoll." The latter, on the other hand, utilizes the International Phonetic Alphabet to give the depth of sound to the Marshallese word for "atoll," distinguishing it from is-

land, and reflecting its phonemic components: *ae* (currents) and *lōñ* (all that surrounds them), which also archives additional information when the word is articulated to place, land and, oceanic movements (and matriline). It moves from the “island as isolate” imaginary to the fullness of Marshallese oceanic culture (DeLoughrey 2013).<sup>24</sup> It is also of the “mother tongue,” moving the mouth and all that it is connected to (the entire body), differently and reclaiming Indigenous movements, challenging the colonization and fragmentation of Indigenous bodies and communities.

The thesis is a lesson in the scale of colonization; although the space-time of colonization is vastly expansive, it occurs at the most intimate spaces of life through which micro-effacements, erasures, and takings – all modalities of colonial conquest – occur and are systematically reproduced when not intentionally rectified. Here, music is the method through which humanistic inquiry plays out concerning intersections of cultural, corporeal, and communal survivance in the Marshallese diaspora at the interstices of the pandemic and generational shifts. Again, music, here, is decidedly “song” as an intergenerational substance that embodies a myriad of transpacific connections in the phonemic realizations of the Marshallese language as it is remembered melodically, in a prosodic formation of Indigenous storied bodies and bodies of stories (e.g., personal, communal, transcorporeal). Benetick’s transcription and translation methods amplify the relatedness of the embodied sonicity to the health of the diasporic community – one that becomes through a new style of *jitdam kapeel* with a new *manit*, evincing how culture is dynamic, albeit steeped in traditions that afford and effectuate connection and protection. Musical language, sounding bodies, and resonant communities are matters of understanding; they are matters of health.

“Songs of Our Atolls,” as such, can be considered a decolonial methodology, especially (but not exclusively) in the context of COVID-19, which shows how colonialism persists in health inequity and structures the underlying medical, economic, and social vulnerabilities through which communities of color have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. “At the basic level, decolonial methodology is a recovery process,” Isidore Kafui Dorpenyo explains. “This methodology seeks to recover the lost identities of colonized people by championing self-determination, empowerment, decolonization, and social justice” (2020). Dorpenyo continues, Decolonial methodology, for instance, seeks to give a voice to indigenous languages, knowl-

edges, and cultures that have been silenced or misrepresented, ridiculed, or condemned, while grounded theory acknowledges participants' experiences and constructs knowledge through participants' experiences and ways of knowing. (ibid.)

"Songs of Our Atolls," through the interweaving of the varied decolonial praxis noted above and explained below, can be considered in these broader terms of decolonial methodology. Uniquely, in the context of COVID-19, it was especially challenging for the elders to get out of their homes and interact with youth not in their immediate (or, on some occasions, in their immediate) families. Multigenerational dwelling, for Marshallese, had always been part of the culture and rarely posed an issue in the diaspora. Suddenly, with COVID-19, it became a health concern to have multiple generations and extended families living together, and the elders had to be protected as they were passing at an increasingly higher rate. This impacted the language, culture, and pedagogical modes of transmission. Moreover, the Marshallese community's sense of multigenerational cohesion thrived off gatherings – church gatherings, community events, birthday parties, and so forth. When COVID-19 became an issue, these functions had to cease. "Songs" offered a space to value the Marshallese language, song-and-story-specific sharing of customary values, and ways of understanding the homeland that, similar to most US educational spaces, have been colonized. Another challenge was finding a space to bring the elders to in safety, and "Songs" afforded an open space where participants had their vaccines (if available), wore masks, and, at times, were separated from each other.

We can think of it in Qwo-Li Driskill's terms of a "decolonial skillshare" (2015). Driskill explains, "A decolonial skillshare creates spaces for Native people to both learn and teach specific embodied *practices* as a specific *tactic* in processes of decolonization." It is a process of collaborative labor that answers community needs. Further, decolonial skillshare has a focus on both activist and pedagogical concerns of Native people. Like other skillshares, it focuses on teaching and disseminating specific embodied practices [...] the decolonial skillshare focuses on embodied practices that continue cultural memories. Decolonial skillshares have intentional and specific goals to heal historical trauma, resist colonization, and continue our traditions. (ibid.)

Although Driskill got the idea of skillshare from punk and activist communities, the latter did not provide space for sharing skills that would help heal historical traumas of racism, sexism, ableism, queer-and-transphobia, colonization, and other systemic violences. I facilitated an academic-focused workshop that put the “Songs” project in a colonial (including missionary and military) and decolonial context. I discussed the workshop content with Benetick to make sure that we placed Marshallese Indigenous concepts front and center, which can be understood as decolonial practice. We asked, for example, about what “harmony” means when it comes to “music,” taking Indigenous notions of place or homeland into consideration. How does the notion of a “song” broaden when thinking about the Marshallese understandings of place (atoll, oceanic) related to the sounds of the language as they shape bodies in performance (of the elders and youth)? Since I am situated in Los Angeles, I chose to Zoom in for the workshop, which April helped to facilitate, given the COVID rates at the time. I drew up an outline of the workshop and offered reading suggestions ahead of the gathering. I used online software that enabled interactivity, such as the cloud-based live presentation software, Ahaslides. The participants, Matthew, Arsi, Kairo, Benetick, and Richard, used their mobile phones to respond to the prompts, which included sound and music clips. The responses were then visualized in different illustrative graphic representations.

Although COVID-19 was the catalyst for the project, I had been working on other musical projects that emphasized intergenerational learning and sharing. However, I had been able to make trips to Springdale, Arkansas, to be present with the community and participate in festivals, gatherings, and MEI staff events, where we would talk over a meal, for example. I remember one conversation with a well-known Marshallese poet while walking back from a restaurant to the MEI office where we shared insights into identity, diaspora, and art. These deeper conversations were missing over Zoom. It was very much focused on the workshop materials and where I also met the members of MARK Harmony for the first time. I was also unable to be present at the recordings for “Songs,” where the elders and youth performed. I would have appreciated being able to get to know the feel of the physical space and how the participants interacted within and in it. I am not a Marshallese person nor was I ‘on the ground’ during the COVID-19 pandemic when it impacted the Northwest Arkansas Marshallese community. As such, I

only learned of the toll of the pandemic on the community via telecommunication, social media, and virtual platforms. It was chilling to hear of the devastation wrought on the community, and was hard to watch as the nonprofit had to shift all its resources to utility-based COVID-19 relief, the workload and tragedy taking a toll on the staff as well. There was a feeling of helplessness that I think many of us had in the midst of the pandemic, and “Songs” became a way to reach out, if only for the workshop, however limited that time was. We knew that it was the start of a larger project that has continued past the throes of the initial COVID-19 impact.

### **Intergenerational currency**

What I remember from [the elders] is that they had a great connection to the islands, to the atolls. That something that I want and something that I want to work towards – is a great connection towards our home. And just picking up what they were putting down. When they started explaining the song and then explaining what the song was about, that hit everyone a little bit differently. For me it hit right in the heart because I’ve heard these stories that they’re singing about growing up, like, my grandpa, my grandma would tell me these stories and now I’m over here working on them – trying to get the word out and telling the world basically what my grandparents told me growing up (M. John, personal communication, August 8, 2022).

“Aelon in Jalooj” (“Jaluit Atoll”)

There are popular Marshallese stories from Jaluit (x2)

They use magic on the Island to escape, seeking knowledge

[...] <sup>7</sup>

“Aelon in Jalooj,” performed by Shine Benkim (of Jaluit Atoll), is an old song from Jaluit Atoll that contains within it culturally atoll-specific legendary figures, proverbs, and moral narratives (to teach cultural behavior). The names of the people and places in the song are what Marshallese refer to as “mwilal” or deep. They are deeply layered terms that contain additional information and are connected to networks of stories that reveal more about the land, the people, and their historical inheritances, including mannerisms. The song divulges, for example, that three brothers are fighting and refuse to listen to each other (refuse to back down), which is called “bukarar” in Marshallese and said to be characteristic of people from Jaluit. The song

gives meaning to this behavior that is generalized of the population. However, when we reflect on the location of Jaluit amidst its colonial history – as the German and Japanese capital, then, refusing to back down or be submissive, to speak one’s mind and hold onto one’s values (and valued land and lineage, stories and songs) – can be viewed for its generative attributes. The song also serves as a cautionary tale, emphasizing how not listening can also be someone’s downfall.



**Figure 5.** Shine Benkim (center) with (from left to right) Marcina Langrine, Matthew John, Benetick Kabua Maddison, Arsi Lokot, Richard Laraya, and Kairo Langrus (kneeling)

(Photo taken by April L. Brown)

Shine Benkim contributed many songs and stories to the “Songs” project. To his surprise, Matthew found out that she was his “auntie” (or “great aunt”) the first day that he met her. This new knowledge perhaps inspired in Matthew an attachment to the song “Aelon in Jalooj,” which stood out for him because



of the depth of knowledge about place, namely, Jaluit Atoll. He felt drawn to the song “because that’s my home; that’s my mom’s [...] my family’s island. It [talked] about the people in the island [...] the connection to the ocean, to the environment. That’s one that really stuck with me” (M. John, personal communication, August 8, 2022).

“Ke Jinō Ear Ba Nān Eō” (“When My Mother Told Me”)

When my mother told me [...] it’s not a part of who we are

When I listen to my mother sing, it makes me sleep

This is the song my mother is singing to me

Snooze away from the sound of the rooster [...] <sup>8</sup>

Matthew disclosed that another impactful song was “Ke Jinō Ear Ba Nān Eō” (“When My Mother Told Me”). He described it as a lesson-based song that is centered on the child’s perspective of cultural lessons as connection, of cultural lessons that come from listening to her mother telling the child what she can and cannot do.<sup>9</sup> The song may have additional importance given that it speaks primarily of the mother, and Marshallese culture is customarily matrilineal. Considering the importation of patriarchal, fraternal governance and the misogynist culture of US imperialism, colonialism, and militarism, Marshallese have maintained that a cultural value is respect of women, mothers, and sisters (the definition of a ‘mother’ and other familial relations are also different in traditional Marshallese culture) as well as the celebration of the birth of a daughter, as featured in Marshallese poet, Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner’s “Dear Matafele Peinem,” which positions the matriline as a call to arms against climate change and its corporate-industrial machine (driven, historically, by male leaders) (Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner 2022).

There is something intimate about recalling your mother’s oral lessons about your culture, and music is the method through which these intimacies take shape – bodily through the singing voice and melodic contour that commits the words, the lessons, to memory. Listening to the mother is an awakening (what to do and not to do) and it is also soothing (as in the lyrics excerpted above). Again, these are lessons that are not reinforced in the diaspora outside the community. There must be an intentional reactivation of the lessons and conditions of possibility to hear them: musical sharing is one of the structuring conditions. And yet, those who are sharing songs – the elders – need to also reside within the conditions of the possibility to be

heard. That is, they need to be respected and valued as having things to contribute. There is an emphasis on innovation and newness in the US culture, and older generations are often mocked for being out of touch (e.g., the generation gap). Matthew located this issue as a central concern when he spoke about how this song, also from Jaluit Atoll, touched him. His observations of the youth’s treatment of the elders and, by extension, Marshallese culture, disappointed him. “I feel that’s one thing that I might like to end,” Matthew said in reference to what he perceived as distasteful and untenable behavior. “For instance, my cousins [...] ever since they moved here, they’ve been struggling with respecting our elders, and I’m, like, don’t forget, like, this is our culture; we’re supposed to respect them” (M. John, personal communication, August 8 2022).

“Ke Jinō Ear Ba Nān Eō” is a song from the mid-1900s in Jaluit Atoll about a mother raising a child. This song has been passed down through multiple generations and is still being sung today. In the music, the mother is talking to her child, and is telling the child how to behave, mannerisms, and not give them up because that’s not part of our culture. There is no current official record of the song other than Kijenimij (an elder) heard the song for the first time in the 1960s when an elder sang that song to her. The song has a significant meaning, it’s a perfect song for Mother’s Day, and we hope this song will continue to be passed through multiple generations.<sup>10</sup>

“Ij Iḳwe Ḳḳ Aelōn Eo Aō” (“I Love My Islands”)

I love my islands, Where I was born, The surroundings, the  
paths, And the gatherings.

I cannot leave here, Because this is my rightful place,  
My family heritage is forever here.

I should die here.<sup>11</sup>

The most consequential song for Benetick was “Ij Iḳwe Ḳḳ Aelōn Eo Aō,” which was the first national anthem of the Marshall Islands. It was adopted in 1979 when the Marshall Islands achieved independence by separating from the UN Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands (administered by the United States). It remained the anthem until 1991 when “Indeeo Majel” (“Forever Marshall Islands”), written by Iroijlaplap Amata Kabua with music composed by the Korean composer Gil ok-yun, became the new national anthem (and remains so today). Benetick located the song’s impact in the lyrics and



melody, specifically in their difference from the new national anthem, which he felt sounded more internationally recognizable as a “national anthem” (a march or hymn). “Ij Iḷkwe ḷḷḷ Aelōñ Eo Aō,” by contrast, was a respected local folk song that had been in circulation for “a long time,” such that the lyricist’s identity is not known. Marshallese musician-composer, Samuel Langrine, composed the music for the song. The music can possibly be attributed, in part, to the folk tune; it amplifies the Marshallese language, for example, in slow ascent of melodic contour.

“Ij Iḷkwe ḷḷḷ Aelōñ Eo Aō” is a song that describes the connection between both island (homeland) and people. The people love their Island so much they feel as if it is best for them to die there. All the memories, gatherings, surroundings, and their treasured culture is what keeps them at bay and as a result creates that strong connection to make them feel like this is their one and only home.<sup>12</sup>

Members of the “Songs” project stated they felt the aforementioned connection in Shine Benkim’s rendition of “Ij Iḷkwe ḷḷḷ Aelōñ Eo Aō.” The importance of the sounds of the Marshallese language and orthographic representation – to which Benetick has been so attentive, serving as an intergenerational intermediary – are related to Marshallese body perceptions and “mother tongue” realizations in the vibrational body. Marshallese cultural values register in specific bodily metaphors, which differ from other cultural representations of the body (Taafaki et al. 2006). A key bodily metaphor is the throat, which has a range of emotional metaphors articulated to it. The throat is the ‘heart’ or center of the soul, emotions, and (prior to the importation of dualism) reason. Emotions are experienced in the throat – one such as grief (būromōj) would translate to the desensitization of the throat (numbing). Similarly, happiness and pride can register in the throat when it is shared widely, as in buñ-būruon (from “famous” “throat”), reflecting the importance of the voice in animating the throat, sharing the throat, to the Marshallese culture that values communality. The throat is not only of the individual, although its emotional depth is considered unknowable beyond the personal bounds. Yet, the throat also shares in the consubstantial community and processes the entirety of the “aelōñ” as in the currents and all that surround them. In short, the throat connects the person to the human and nonhuman communities that comprise “place,” sharing in the movements of and by being air, water, and land. Alessandro Duranti examined transnational

communities where “speaking about space can be a way of bridging physically distant but emotionally and ethically close worlds” (1997). Following Durranti’s assessments of how embodiment of a particular translocal space can occur through a series of ceremonial acts (ibid.), and if we take music as a method to realize the cultural depths of sounding the atolls via the embodied throat as a communal connection, then we can better understand how the youth participants become embodied, culturally, through “Songs of Our Atolls.”

I watched a video of Matthew reciting the lyrics to “Ij Iḷkwe ḷḷk Aelōñ Eo Aō.” In the video, he reads the first verse. “Ooooo! I *know* I said that right, I *felt it in my tongue*”; he is all smiles and points to his mouth. He reiterates the verse, still smiling, now a bit more confidently, more quickly. He finishes the song, and silently looks over with a grin to the control room where Richard and Kairo are watching, listening, filming, and recording. Kairo nods enthusiastically as Matthew asks, “How was that? Better?” Kairo continues to nod, “That was really good man!” “Thanks!” Matthew responds, “I’ve been working on it.” He proudly stresses how he speaks Marshallese at home, which might not be remarkable in the Marshall Islands, but it is in the US diaspora. “Ah, for real?” Kairo follows with encouragement, “Yeee-aaahhh!” When we viewed the video together recently, his performance brought up the musical embodiment of Marshallese culture that he was experiencing. He conveyed that he had grown up speaking more Spanish (due to his stepfather’s culture) than Marshallese at home, until he moved to Springdale, AR. Born in the United States, Matthew yearns for that connection the more he learns. The yearning is, in some ways, akin to the emotion of loneliness, isolated from someone or something meaningful (many Marshallese speak of their homelands as members of the family). Loneliness is documented to have negative health impacts, and it becomes apparent that the situated embodiment that “Songs” afforded Matthew is just the first step to bridging the gap with his homeland, as a matter of health and healing, much like getting his vaccine has been (Hwang et al. 2020; Lonergan-Cullum et al. 2022).

### **Part 3: Future directions and challenges**

*Passing the torch, or lighting the ancestral as future*

In the context of COVID-19, when the health and vulnerability of the elders was even more front and center and the gulf between the needs of the elders and the youth, in terms of well-being, was even more pronounced, it ultimately seemed that the Marshallese youth involved and invested in this project realized that the substance of the “Songs of Our Atolls” actualized as something akin to what we might consider dynamic inheritance. The youth were learning the songs, the lyrics and the Marshallese language, the meanings, and the skills needed to produce the project. These lessons are quite significant. And yet, it seemed like their attentive and attentional methods – attentive and attentional to the elders and their well-being – was more than the sum of these lessons; it was about learning to lead via learning how to take care of the elders as family, humans, and pathways to the future (rather than conduits for stories of the past). They were learning how to search for and find a voice, and meaning in that voice, as they themselves grew into caretakers, as finding and sharing a meaningful voice (as in singing meaningful songs) became the method through which they prepared themselves to better look after and protect their community and the knowledge they materially committed to resonate (on record, literally). “Songs” as a method steeped in the MEI’s community-driven CBPR approach is, thus, one that is crucially about health and how the “substance of a song” in the reality of the pandemic demanded how the participating youth related to their tradition and the carriers of their tradition, as they began to see in themselves – or hear in themselves (and, thus, feel in themselves) – the possibility (due to necessity) of leadership and carrying tradition, albeit utilizing it for specifically situated justice, political, and social (educational) demands in the diasporic context.

I want to see a lot of good things come out [of this project]. I want to see growth, like more people tune in and be engaged with elders after seeing what we do with the elders, maybe it will inspire them to have more conversations with their grandparents about where they’re coming from, their backgrounds, and saving the knowledge of the family tree and to keep passing it down. Because, currently [the elders] are still holding the torch and they still haven’t passed it down yet because we’re not ready, it feels like [...] Our collective youth in Springdale, anyways, we just haven’t been engaged enough to necessarily take the action or initiative that these elders want us to take. And being or creating a bridge between elder and youth is one thing

that I feel like has to be established in order for our culture to evolve or continue on. I’m excited to see what happens with because I know that there are a lot more youth [who are interested] (M. John, personal communication, August 8 2022).

It’s important to me to continue working with the elders and the youth because one of the things we want to do is to make sure the language is still going strong, especially with the young people (B. Kabua Maddison, personal communication, August 16 2022).

We might consider the “music as method” CBPR approach of “Songs” to constitute a *process project* whereby its import is how it inspired the community’s exploration and query-based dialogue (à la jitdam kapeel, “seeking knowledge guarantees wisdom”). The knowledge that is sought is ancestral knowledge that takes shape in the sound, voices, and songs of the Marshall Islands’ atolls – the currents and all above (land, sky, humans, nonhumans). These movements are modalities of sharing. The COVID-19 pandemic challenged the MEI to develop “Songs,” where connections were possible through music in a more structured perhaps less ‘organic’ way, where elders were paired with youth and the project unfolded in a recording studio that, in part, dictated time frames and relations (where the youth were recording as well as performing). Music guided the stories, language sharing, and insight methodologically into Marshallese diasporic identities; it became a means of compressing temporal expanses that may have been realized through the community over the months and years that COVID-19 took. It also became a repository of memories for the urgency of sharing during the COVID-19 pandemic that some youth had taken for granted before the pandemic. As I have mentioned, we are continuing this project, so it is important to ask the question: How methodologically has “Songs” effected which ancestral knowledge is being shared and how these methods can lead to immediate, intermediate, and long-term impacts on how Marshallese relate to themselves and each other healthfully? To better understand the wide methodological reach of “Songs” historically as it projects into the future, it is crucial to think about the systems and structures that have rendered the Marshallese vulnerable beyond the oft cited nuclear and climate issues, pressing and serious though they are.

As Brown recalled, CACHE offered this opportunity to arts and cultural establishments because they recognized they could not function during the pandemic; people were not able to come into brick-and-mortar establishments. They could not have hands-on training, creative workshops, or public programming. Allyson Esposito, the executive director of CACHE, the initial funding organization, said that “CACHE” was “proud to partner with many of the region’s resilient cultural organizations to reimagine the structures and systems they use to create and operate” (Cache 2022). Turning her enthusiastic gesture into inquiry can help reimagine the temporalities through which the sustained benefits of a project such as “Songs” could come to fruition. Any “structure” or “system” is the product of generational investments and reinvestments, affirmed through their intentional and unintentional architectural designs and discursive affirmations of the taken-for-grantedness of these structures and systems (e.g., the epistemic, cosmologic, cosmogenic and practical foundations – the ways of being, doing, making, feeling and sensing). It is now common knowledge that during the formation of the US, early Anglo-American colonizers and missionaries separated Native and Black families – youth from adults and, crucially, the elders who would raise them and teach them about their being human in the world, their worlds, and all the strengths and possibilities therein from all the generational knowledge before that had come down through values that inhere in language, movement, gestures, stories, songs, and all other cultural means of communication (where communication IS defined as “sharing” or the bonds of community).

The American missionization of the Pacific, the Marshall Islands included, has a corollary of American Indian boarding (or residential) schools, with their aim of civilizing the Native population. Youth from different archipelagos were taken to islands far from their families by the missionaries from the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, and their method and space-time of learning shifted to the modern school day and to reading books, writing on paper, and learning arithmetic (particularly for accounting) and being taught about North American ideas concerning health and hygiene. Moreover, and crucially, hymns, anthems, and other North Atlantic musical training was central to these schools’ communal activities. And yet, these educational activities shifted from *jitdam kapeel*, *bwebwena-to*, and other forms of skill-based community work, such as building and

sending off a canoe. Children were not only taught Anglo-American ways and encouraged to then teach their communities (especially in the moral sense), they were also often explicitly forbidden from practicing their cultural expressions and traditions. The strategic miseducation of communities of color, colonized groups, and, here, the Marshallese historically underpins the severe toll the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the community. Songs have been part of this strategic miseducation, and they have been part of the Marshallese refusal to cede their educational, communicative, and world-view modes of sharing (and manifesting) across time and space.

There is a lot of pressure on youth to conform to American ways, which can include claiming an identity as stable. “Songs” recognizes that, as a project, it is a process, but more than that, the participants realize that their identities are processes as well; they are dynamic and contextual. “Songs” offered youth time to query what respect means, for example, in terms of application, protection and care-taking of the elders and, by extension, the culture generatively situated in the homeland and larger diasporic movements. This, I think, is what Matthew is referring to when he speaks of “the torch” being passed. A torch lights the way; it is the breadth of knowledge and knowledge of how to communicate it through which Marshallese worlds unfold through the pathways forged. Given many of the Marshallese youth in Arkansas have been acculturated away from this knowledge, projects such as “Songs” are the processes through which they can learn experientially and experimentally that which they would most likely not be taught in school.

Take music (transcription) as method. A challenge for Matthew was that he was unable to do an adequate musical transcription of Shine singing the anthem. He was focused on the notes – the vocal melody and chordal accompaniment that would support. We discussed inputting the pitches with a keyboard into Logic Pro (digital audio workstation). He confessed that it did not sound like Shine’s performance of the song, perhaps, he mused, because of her singing off-key or having pitch issues. Returning to the difference between the first and new anthems, the first comes from an old folk song where singers are not expected, necessarily, to have perfect pitch. Pitch and key are not necessarily valued. The Marshallese language and music that supports its delivery accommodates elders’ voices singing these songs, and, as such, they cannot be reduced to the pitches. Recalling the work of the throat and the mother tongue, how Matthew knew he had “got it,” harmony

is not so much the layered pitches but comes instead from the movements of the intergenerational bodies in the space of musical connection. The song is much more than a pitch-based reduction. It is a felt recollection of oceanic movements or atoll currency. So, how to transcribe the “Songs of Our Atolls” that are felt and known by the embodied and shared sounds and given the structural form of a “song” or Eurogenic harmony that can be likened to a virtual assemblage or platform to approximate the reality of lived, felt experience? Transcription can be like Zoom instructions to bring people to a meeting in a way that is only surface. The depth or the actual transcription is the corporeal choreography that follows.

Perhaps a future direction can be workshopping creative transcriptions with the elders based on bodily, land-based, and otherwise culturally important, connective metaphors. Moreover, we could extend this to multiple bidirectional literacy objectives, such that the youth spend more time helping the elders learn digital literacies, such as digital recording, so they are able to make self-determined and informed choices on how their musical materials are recorded and preserved. Such multilayered learning and skill-sharing can have unforeseen outcomes and innovations beyond what was previously thought. Marshallese sound-as-musical thought, for example, might be realized on record through playing with levels and on the page by playing with symbols that the youth had not thought of because of their North Atlantic musical education that frames their sensorial understandings.

## Conclusion

*CBPR as viable in the (health) arts and humanities*

The CBPR approaches have been used widely in the sciences, social sciences, and public health. Their application in the field of humanities research is less widespread, particularly with the focus on Pacific Islander diasporic community in this essay: the Marshallese community in Northwest Arkansas. I have shown how CBPR teams have been assembled and collaborative work implemented by UAMS researchers who include Marshallese medical professionals, community leaders, and nonprofit representatives (e.g., the MEI has been part of the CBPR team). The UAMS CBPR approach, since its implementation in 2013, is concerned with research agendas to address and reduce the health disparities between the Marshallese and non-

Marshallese communities regionally. Importantly, the research areas have been chosen by the community in conversation with team researchers, showcasing an advance in medicine that takes ‘the community’ into consideration giving 1) attention to a community’s needs – physical, cultural, and otherwise – especially those underrepresented agentively in medicine, and 2) the necessity of reaffirming that health is a communal production in medical frameworks. It is important to recognize how health is viewed in the sciences, specifically the medical sciences, in ways that depend on categorical strictures that limit what counts in health and medicine regarding academic and professional research, diagnosis, and treatment. Biomedical health has been viewed historically in terms of the individual person, and shape what is imagined in the realm of “studies” (data-driven, goals, objectives) and projects. While music can be viewed in the purview of the sciences, the methods and outcomes are often different, as are those that study and employ music specifically for what has become “music therapy.”

A central challenge to sustain any project is always funding. Almost a decade ago, when the MEI’s Humanities Initiatives began, paying interlocutors or the people who shared their oral histories was not common practice. Today, it is more common to compensate people who share their stories, and the MEI is committed to this practice because it values our participant’s time and energy as labor, as work. “Songs of Our Atolls” had monetary compensation for all the participants written into the grant and paid them accordingly. So, while there are a number of directions that this project can take in what some are calling our ‘post-pandemic’ world, it is necessary to bring up the issue of funding, particularly when it comes to the arts and humanities in the US. It is all the more difficult when, unlike the sciences and social sciences, these projects might not have quantitative deliverables, readily available data, or even an end-goal that could be realized in the grant’s timeline.

While humanistic inquiry and research are drawn from increasingly interdisciplinary fields of knowledge and employ diverse methodologies, academia still values the attribution of a single author in humanistic work (e.g., an article, a monograph). Otherwise, community-engaged work is often placed under the service category. While this is not an essay about the institutional valuation of CBPR in the humanities, from the outset, it is prudent to point out one of the fundamental challenges to humanities researchers who might be interested in assessing methodological applicability or feasibility. The



MEI is committed to humanities-focused CBPR as intercultural, social justice work, and facilitates such sustained collaborative, community-driven work where co-learning takes place between the Marshallese community and the researcher(s) where there are 1) tangible benefits to (resources for) the community based on their immediate interests, needs, and wants, 2) opportunities for community members that can help remedy systemic and structural injustices, and 3) avenues for advancing knowledge based on Marshallese epistemologies, cosmologies, and value systems in the context of the larger diaspora and intercultural educational models. In this way, Marshallese thought and practice is shown to be dynamic as it inflects and impacts programming for non-Marshallese, disrupting the colonial categorical model that isolates and freezes cultural systems, often privileging one ('Western') as the baseline or normative model. As I address herein, Marshallese sound and musical knowledge in the context of the pandemic depends on particular material relations, including the materiality of the singing voice as it becomes a conduit between elder and youth when other more physically proximate interactions would render the community vulnerable by putting those that harbor its unique knowledges at risk. "Music as method" as CBPR employs songs as a cultural substance that can extend intergenerational communication, as a means of health and healing, through decolonial skill-sharing and transpacific embodiments that lengthen the space-time of oceanic proximity, even amidst COVID-19 and the "post-pandemic" waves of isolation.

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## Notes

1. “Marshallese are estimated to make up just 1.5% to 3% of the total population of Benton and Washington counties, yet they accounted for 19% of all COVID-19 cases in the region (9). Of Marshallese patients with COVID-19 during March–June 2020, 9% were hospitalized (9). Nationally, CDC reported that 144.1 per 100,000 (<0.01%) of patients with COVID-19 were hospitalized as of June 2020. Most alarmingly, Marshallese people accounted for 38% of the reported deaths in the 2-county region during March–June 2020 (9). The Marshallese community in northwest Arkansas bears a much larger burden of COVID-19 infection, hospitalization, and death than other racial and ethnic minorities (2,9)” (McElfish et al. 2021).
2. The population of the Marshall Islands has declined by 26 % in the past decade alone.
3. “From March through July 2020, we launched 11 Facebook live sessions, which garnered approximately 25,000 views each. We launched 18 short YouTube videos that covered topics such as proper mask use, social distancing, and quarantine and isolation guidance. We developed written educational materials focused on COVID-19’s effect on pregnancies and people with diabetes and asthma, along with guidance for funerals, church services, and other common situations where transmission is increased (Figure 2, in text). We also developed and launched a COVID-19 faith-based tool kit for churches and other faith organizations. All materials are in the Marshallese language and include photos of Marshallese people.”
4. Another common issue with the written Marshallese language is the generational differences in spelling and the increasing number of Marshallese born in the United States who can speak but cannot read Marshallese.
5. “All our staff assist with our COVID-19 Response and Relief Project and speak with clients and community members regularly about vaccine hesitancy. Reluctance by some stems from various sources but is amplified by misinformation on social media and anecdotal stories shared by other community members. Mistrust in the US medical establishment and a lack of un-

derstanding about medical science coupled with the conservative political climate that rejects prevention efforts and the vaccine, which is prevalent in Arkansas and the Midwest, exacerbates the situation.”

6. MOHP and Digital Music Archive (est. 2014, MEI, see: <https://www.mei.ngo/mohp> and <https://www.mei.ngo/humanities>), “Mapping Aelōñ Kein Ad” (a blueprint, authored by Kristina Stege and author), and Schwartz and Brown (2019).

7. “Songs of Our Atolls” partial English translation of “Aelōñ in Jalooj” (March 2021, in progress).

8. “Songs of Our Atolls” partial English translation of “Ke Jinō Ear Ba Ñan Eō” (March 2021, in progress).

9. Matthew stressed that the song can be from the perspective of any gendered child but that it is about the mother’s cultural lessons.

10. “Songs of Our Atolls” description of “Ke Jinō Ear Ba Ñan Eō” (March 2021, in progress).

11. “Songs of Our Atolls” partial English translation of “Ij Iḷkwe Iḷk Aelōñ Eo Aō” (March 2021, in progress).

12. “Songs of Our Atolls” description of “Ij Iḷkwe Iḷk Aelōñ Eo Aō” (March 2021, in progress).

## About the author

**Jessica A. Schwartz** is an associate professor of musicology at the Herb Alpert School of Music at the University of California, Los Angeles. Schwartz’s work focuses on critical, creative, and poetic dissent from an interrogation of sonic histories and musical representations of imperial and military violence, as explored in *Radiation Sounds: Marshallese Music and Nuclear Silences* (Duke, 2021), *American Quarterly*, and *Women & Music*, as well as DIY/punk musicality/philosophy/education in *Punk Pedagogies: Music, Culture and Learning* (Routledge, 2017) and the journal *Punk & Post-Punk*. Schwartz is the academic advisor to and co-founder of the Marshallese Educational Initiative (501c3), and co-hosts the Punkast Series.