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History, Ethics, and the Environmental Archive

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By M. X. Mitchell

In Marshallese culture the environment itself is sacred.[1] Yet American colonizers used ancestral environments in the Marshall Islands for devastating nuclear weapons testing and related environmental research. Once central to emerging understandings of radiobiology, geology, and ecology, archival records of environmental research in the Marshall Islands offer a wealth of data to historians of science and the environment. These data are the fruits of exploitative, extractive, and destructive scientific enterprise. What ethical obligations attach to historians' use of such data? What are the ethics of the environmental archive?

At Yale University's recent Critical Histories and Activist Futures conference, I reflected on these questions in the context of my work on the legal history of nuclear weapons testing in the Marshall Islands. Located in the mid-Pacific region of Oceania just north of the equator, the Marshall Islands were the site of sixty-seven American nuclear weapons tests conducted at Bikini and Enewetak atolls between 1946 and 1958. The United States tested its largest and most powerful weapons in the Marshall Islands, including the first hydrogen bomb and the largest nuclear device ever detonated by the United States. Because of these tests, atolls within the Marshall Islands have been critical sites of environmental research for the past seventy years. Scientists scrambled to document atoll environments before they were contaminated and, afterwards, used contamination as a tracing mechanism to understand biological, ecological, and geological processes.

Cold War conflicts over research in the Marshalls highlighted how the environment as a concept was both culturally contingent and ethically fraught. Where Westerners typically designated "the environment" as that which surrounds and exists apart from the human body, Islanders saw no clear separation. As I discussed in a recent article, during the 1970s, Islanders from Enewetak Atoll used American conceptions of bodily integrity and informed consent to explain this difference. They argued that cutting Islanders off from their ancestral atolls was like amputating an American's limb without consent. Islanders elaborated that, for them, the body-environment connection is fundamental and inseverable.[2]

Marshallese beliefs about abiding connections between people and their

ancestral atolls endure to the present day. Calling on these beliefs, a resident of Enewetak recently recounted to me that she learned of ongoing, privately funded American experimentation only after her young sons found an American student on the family's ancestral lands collecting coconuts for use in radiological testing. "Can you believe it?" she asked rhetorically. "Haven't they taken enough from us already?"[3] What happens, then, when environmental research becomes environmental data, and environmental data are collected and taken to faraway archives?

Most historical work contemplating the ethics of archival practices has focused on biological archives, which historians have recognized as ethically complicated sites.[4] As the Marshallese case illustrates, however, where environmental science was predicated on dispossession, violence, and the infliction of suffering, environmental archives may raise similar and additional ethical dilemmas.

Not least, environmental archives raise questions concerning conflicting ontologies and belief systems. As historians of science have explored, scientific archives often incorporate scientific researchers' underlying assumptions.[5] Environmental archives of the twentieth century United States, for example, typically incorporate assumptions that there is an inherent distinction between human bodies and the environment, between data and referents, and between past and present. These assumptions do not necessarily hold in the Marshallese worldview, where even data about one's ancestral atoll may be seen as special or sacred. An environmental archive may be much more than a simple reminder of a dark past; It can be a site of ongoing harm in the present. How, then, should historians engage with archival materials and with communities who see environmental data in a different light—as a present-day connection to a sacred person or place or a memory of a grievous injury?

Environmental archives also raise questions of access.[6] Locating archival documents is part of the historian's craft, and traveling to collections is a central—often financially supported—part of historical employment. For members of affected communities, however, even tracking down documents may be a daunting task. Accessing documents often raises insurmountable financial difficulties, particularly when documents have been moved to far-off archives in colonial metropoles. In the context of the Marshall Islands, for example, the vast majority of environmental data drawn from nuclear testing are held in the United States. Although the Clinton administration made some documents available online, subsequent administrations removed them from government databases. Historian of science Alex Wellerstein and archivists William Burr and Trudy Huskamp Peterson have worked with the Republic of the Marshall Islands' government to recover and make available online documents removed from the database.[7] Nevertheless,

mountains of environmental data were never part of U.S. digitization initiatives and remain housed in archival collections across the United States. Islanders have their own histories to tell and their own uses to make of environmental data culled from the destruction and contamination of their ancestral atolls, but they do not have easy access to the records. If historians take seriously the notion that environmental data can carry special resonances for some communities, then we should also think seriously about facilitating community access to archival materials.

Finally, environmental archives raise questions of representation. Some historians may choose to minimize or ignore the exploitative context of environmental science, erasing suffering communities entirely. Others, in contrast, may choose to tell stories of suffering without taking into account affected community members' own views and voices. As an astute Marshallese op-ed writer remarked, some authors who cover the nuclear legacy have been little more than "traveling tragedy writers" building careers out of Islanders' suffering.[8] What should be included in stories of extractive environmental research? Whose voices should be included? And how might historians work with communities to acknowledge suffering without exploiting or fetishizing it?

I wish to suggest that historians have ethical responsibilities toward the archival materials with which we work and the communities touched—even injured—by an archive's creation and ongoing use. Historians are not neutral observers of the past. We are privileged memory-makers whose status and financial resources enable us to collect, curate, and narrate the stuff of history.[9] Quite often, as in my own case, we are white citizens from a colonizing nation-state. The thin line separating past injustices from the present-day historical enterprise cannot insulate historians from the political and ethical implications of our work. If we are not careful, our histories may magnify the assumptions and problems built into environmental archives, for example by valorizing expert knowledge and Western beliefs about the environment, and/or potentially reinjuring harmed communities. Although the histories we write may ultimately be critical ones, even exceptional critical historical analysis cannot remedy the gross power imbalances woven into the fabric of the archive—especially in imperial and postcolonial contexts.[10] We should consider, then, whether and how historians can share the privilege and the power we possess.

Those of us who work in and with environmental archives should reflect further on our fields' practices and goals.[11] Historians who work on environmental justice have, in many cases, thought deeply about these issues in relation to their own projects. Many collaborate closely with oppressed or dispossessed communities implicated in their histories. Individual historians have taken steps such as seeking permission to work

on sacred or sensitive topics, sharing their writing or having it translated, volunteering in local communities, making archival resources available, and donating book profits to community organizations. Archivists specializing in health information and Indigenous history have likewise often thought carefully about such questions. These critical conversations should be deepened and expanded.

The ethical conundrums of environmental archives touch work far beyond the fields of environmental justice and Indigenous studies. Many historians use environmental archival data built on suffering or dispossession. This is particularly true in settler colonial contexts. How much North American environmental science and exploration, for example, has relied on Indigenous lands or Indigenous knowledge? How much environmental knowledge has been predicated on environmental suffering and the proliferation of environmental injustice across communities of all kinds?

Historians working on environmental knowledge produced in the context of dispossession, inequality, and suffering might also consider the ethics of their practices and the archives they use. If every historian who has written about environmental experiments conducted in the Marshall Islands, for example, took the simple step of sharing English-language copies of their work with educational institutions in the islands, it would aid in Islanders' initiatives to remember and seek justice for nuclear testing. If those same historians had abstracts of their work translated into Marshallese or, more ambitiously, worked to enable the sharing of archival records about experiments in the islands, the effects on education and memory-making, and even on Islanders' contemporary environmental scientific studies in the Marshalls could be significant.[12] Such steps need not be limited to Indigenous communities affected by environmental harm. They could be extended anywhere that environmental knowledge has been built upon suffering or violence.

These are only opening questions for consideration and starting points for potential collaborations. In the Marshall Islands and beyond, discussions of the ethics of environmental archives should prioritize the viewpoints and desires of affected communities, even up to the point of communities' exercises of refusal.[13] Historians, archivists, and social scientists working on health and on biological samples—especially within Indigenous communities—have often assumed as much.[14] It is time for historians working on environment to follow the path forged by scholars of environmental injustice and Indigenous studies to deepen searches for ethically sound practices and collaborations.

Developing collaborations and engaging with affected communities may be uncomfortable or even frustrating for historians accustomed to the cloistered work of the academy. Participating in such initiatives may

sometimes lead to conflicts or disagreements. It may have financial—and especially professional—costs for historians in a field that too often prioritizes authorship of specialized monographs for small scholarly audiences. In such collaborations, a historian's subjective experiences and goals should not be a primary concern: the community's needs should take precedence. Discomfort and cost, moreover, need not be seen as indicators of failure. They are important signs of the ethical and political stakes of historical work.

At a time when scholars of the humanities are being called upon to justify our social relevance, academic institutions and senior historians should begin valuing deeper collaborations—with affected communities, with scientists, with policymakers, and beyond. In the meantime, as panel upon panel concluded in the searching discussions at the Critical Histories and Activist Futures conference, it is up to individual historians to follow their own moral compasses and to act as catalysts for change. Historians cannot alone undo the injustices of the past, or even of environmental archives. But we can and should do more.

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Notes

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[2] See M.X. Mitchell, "Offshoring American Environmental Law: Land, Culture, and Marshall Islanders' Struggles for Self-Determination During the 1970s," *Environmental History* 22 (2017): 209-234.

[3] Quoted with permission.

[4] On biological archives see, for example, Jenny Reardon, *Race to the Finish: Identity and Governance in an Age of Genomics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); Kim TallBear, *Native American DNA: Tribal Belonging and the False Promise of Genetic Science* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013); Emma Kowal and Joanna Radin, "Indigenous Biospecimen Collections and the Cryopolitics of Frozen Life," *Journal of Sociology* 51 (2015): 63-80; Joanna Radin, *Life on Ice: A History of New Uses for Cold Blood* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

[5] On this point, see, for example, Lorraine Daston, "Introduction: Third Nature", in *Science in the Archives: Pasts, Presents, Futures*, ed. Lorraine Daston (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

[6] I do not mean to suggest that paper records are the only or the best way to know about the past. Many cultures prioritize oral traditions and family records. Paper records, however, offer additional resources. In the Marshall Islands, they may provide other means of connecting with and understanding contaminated ancestral atolls under increasing threat from climate change.

[7] For a description of this project and access to the database, see http://data.nuclearsecrecy.com/mindd/?action=about.

[8] Editorial, *Marshall Islands Journal*, n.d., Box 5, Folder: 139, Jack Adair Tobin Papers, Unprocessed Collection, University of Hawai'i at M?noa Pacific Collections, Honolulu, HI. Scholars have critiqued the replacement of the other with the suffering subject. See, for example, Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Audra Simpson, "On Ethnographic Refusal: Indigeneity, 'Voice', and Colonial Citizenship," *Junctures* 9 (2007): 67-80; Eve Tuck, "Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities," *Harvard Educational Review* 79 (2009): 409-427; Joel Robbins, "Beyond the Suffering Subject: Toward an Anthropology of the Good," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 19 (2013): 447-462.

[9] On this point, see Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).

[10] For discussion of the problems of so-called "moves to innocence"—acts by privileged persons that are intended to remove culpability for past injustices without actually ceding any power or privilege—see Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1 (2012): 1-40.

[11] Some anthropologists working in the Marshall Islands have managed similar tensions in their own work by participating in advocacy on behalf of Islanders. Holly M. Barker and Barbara Rose Johnston's *Consequential Damages of Nuclear War: The Rongelap Report* (New York: Routledge, 2008), for example, arose in part out of expert research prepared for a legal damages claim. See also Kim Fortun, *Advocacy After Bhopal: Environmentalism, Disaster, New Global Orders* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001). I am not suggesting that historians should invariably take roles as expert advocates. As historians' involvements in lawsuits about big tobacco have shown, historians' participation in legal advocacy may raise other ethical conundrums and controversies. See, for example, Robert N. Proctor, "'Everyone Knew but No One Had Proof': Tobacco Industry Use of Medical History Expertise in US Courts, 1990-2002," *Tobacco Control* 15 (2006), 117-125 (expressing one historian expert witness's view).

[12] With luck, a translated version of this article will soon be published in Marshallese. Unfortunately, the sharing of archival materials is often hindered by archives' own restrictions on dissemination. In the case of the Marshall Islands U.S. federal laws governing the export of technical data may create additional complications.

[13] On the importance and politics of refusal see Simpson, "On Ethnographic Refusal"; Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "R-Words: Refusing Research," in *Humanizing Research: Decolonizing Qualitative Inquiry with Youth and Communities*, eds. Django Paris and Maisha T. Winn (Los Angeles: Sage, 2013), 223-248.

[14] Indigenous scholars have led the way in analyzing practices of mentorship and collaboration. For discussion of collaboration, see Kim TallBear, "Standing With and Speaking as Faith: A Feminist-Indigenous Approach to Inquiry, *Journal of Research Studies* 10 (2014), *available at* http://jrp.icaap.org/index.php/jrp/article/view/405/371. For a seminal volume about research and Indigenous communities and, especially, research conducted by Indigenous researchers, see Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (New

York: Zed Books, 1999). For an analysis of white anti-racists’ attempts to help Indigenous communities in Australia, see Emma Kowal, *Trapped in the Gap: Doing Good in Indigenous Australia* (New York: Berghahn, 2015).

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