Sound Knowledge and the Liminal

Oceanic Wellbeing in the Anthropocene

BENJAMIN DUESTER

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Sound Knowledge and the Liminal explores liminality as a key feature of life in the Anthropocene. Drawing on a 6-month research project conducted in Mājro, Marshall Islands, it not only contextualises existing continental literature on liminality with a Pacific-centred perspective but also proposes that sound functions as a principal pathway for understanding wellbeing in one of Micronesia's most resilient and vibrant urban centres. Locating everyday life in Mājro as constantly shifting between the qualities of continental city and coral atoll, the book traces how the local community uses sound to gain wellbeing in liminal spaces. Synthesising theories on Anthropocene islands, sound knowledge, vibratory labour and the auditory bubble, it highlights ludic appropriation and sonic cocoons as central to the affordances of an urbanised atoll space.

Providing a thought-provoking discussion of liminality outside of the context of continental cities, this book will be a vital reading for anyone for studying the relationships between Oceanic lives, sound and liminality. Especially relevant for scholars, it is also suitable for students and researchers in fields such as sound studies, cultural studies, political ecology and Pacific studies.

Benjamin Duester is an ERC-fellow in the Department of Musicology at Georg August University of Göttingen, Germany. He is a co-founder of the international research network *SSHRED* (Skating, Sustainability, Health Research, Environmental Design) for which he co-convenes the SSHRED Seminar series and serves as editor of the *Green Pressure* zine. He is the author of *Tomorrow on Cassette: Tape Jams in the New Media Age* (2025).

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About the Author

Benjamin Duester is an ERC-fellow in the Department of Musicology at Georg August University of Göttingen, Germany. He is a co-founder of the international research network *SSHRED* (Skating, Sustainability, Health Research, Environmental Design) for which he co-convenes the SSHRED Seminar series and serves as editor of the *Green Pressure* zine. He is the author of *Tomorrow on Cassette: Tape Jams in the New Media Age* (2025).

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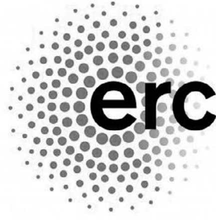

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Introduction

Mājro, Aelōñ, Tawūn, Jikin Kweḷọk[1]

About 20 years after the end of World War II, the American anthropologist, Alexander Spoehr, published a book in 1966 with the title 'Majuro: A Village in the Marshall Islands' in which he describes his impressions that he gathered while living on the atoll for nine and a half months in the late 1940s (Spoehr 1966: 3). His use of the word 'village' is peculiar and permeates the book like a golden thread; with it, he refers to the area called Lora (Laura) at the western end of the atoll. The name stems from US military nomenclature that organised the islets of atolls alphabetically according to names in the English language during WWII. There are no terms in the Marshallese language for differentiating between the imported continental concepts of village, town and city. Spoehr found that communities, which he also refers to as 'villages', are commonly denominated by the names of the islands on which they are built, a practice that continues to this day. Besides the adoption of the English word 'town' as 'tawūn', the other Marshallese word that can be interpreted as 'city' is *jikin kweḷọk*, stemming from *jikin* 'place of' and *kweḷọk* 'assembly'. This understanding not only locates togetherness at the core of Marshallese communal living but also illustrates its flexibility. *Jikin kweḷọk* is not defined by the number of its members, such as in the arbitrary differentiations between village and town and city. Forcing external terminology and ideology onto Mājro's *aelōñ* (atoll) space fits within the tradition of ethnographic, scientific, political and military views on Micronesia that continue to mis-evaluate and misrepresent size and distance through labels such as 'small island nations' or 'small island developing states' (King and Tennant 2014; Moncada et al. 2021; Rudge 2021; Saddington 2015; Spiteri 2022). As Epeli Hau'ofa (1994) has pointed out, this perspective on islands does not stem from their indigenous communities but is forcefully established in the wake of Anglo-European colonial expansion. To illustrate this in the case of Mājro, one of the 29 coral atolls in the Republic of the Marshall Islands that altogether contain 1156 islands and islets, most of the islands are not wider than a few hundred metres. If one drives with a car on Lagoon Road through most of Mājro's neighbourhoods from one end of the longest stretch of islands connected through bridges and dams, they will spend around an hour on the road when driving between 25 and 50 kilometres per hour.

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There are countless adjectives to describe what life on an atoll feels like, and 'small' is likely the most vacuous of them all. Examples can nevertheless be found in German colonial narratives by authors such as H. Linckens (1911) and Augustin Krämer et al. (1938), who also use the term 'village' (Dorf) to describe housing across various atolls and islands. Linckens (1911: 18 ff.), for example, details the layout of the *jikin kweḷọk* in the atoll of Jālwōj (Jaluit), the German colonial administrative centre of the Marshall Islands between 1884 and 1920, in a condescending tone, stating that 'the main place (capital city would be an overstatement) of the Marshall Islands is called Jaluit, even though the village of the natives that actually carries this name is located about four hours further South' (Linckens 1911: 18).[2] Linckens generalises that the Marshallese prefer to live in 'idyllic disorder'[3] comparable to medieval Europe (Linckens 1911: 19) and that resolving this 'disorder' would not take too much effort as he finds that most Marshallese live 'in pathetic huts'[4] made from pandanus leaves while only the few chiefs are able to follow the example of the whites and acquire the luxury of a timber dwelling (Linckens 1911: 19). Although he grasps some of the Marshallese adaptation dynamics as communities in Jālwōj and other atolls dealt with missionaries and traders (see Berta 2021, 2024), his prejudice visibly limits an understanding of the sociocultural complexities in Jālwōj beyond his notion of the European village. While a substantial body of literature on the Marshall Islands has accumulated since the publication of Spoehr's immediate post-war account, comparatively few works focus their attention on Mājro and how it shifted from the outskirts of the German and Japanese colonial empires to the urban centre of the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), not only becoming its representative capital and location for the *nitijeḷā* (law-making body, parliament) but also home to most Marshallese citizens in the nation (Hess 2004: 190; see also Spennemann 1998). In this sense, Spoehr's book documents the short period between the end of WWII, the beginning of the Cold War arms race that devastated the Marshall Islands and its citizens, and the establishment of the RMI as a self-administered and competitively trading nation (see Barker 2013; Johnston and Barker 2008; Kupferman 2011; Niedenthal 2002). Nevertheless, it is necessary to trace how Mājro has changed since.

0.1 Mājro in the 21st Century

Following substantial reconstruction after the floods of 1979 (Spennemann 1998), Jim Hess notes in a study from the early 2000s that Mājro has become one of Micronesia's 'urban centers, connected to the world by an international airport and port facilities as well as communications satellites and a constant flow of officials and businesspeople coming and going' (Hess 2004: 189). As a result, the 'rural communities, where anthropologists used to go in search of authentic culture, escaping the presumptively inauthentic hybrid forms of the cities' (Hess 2004: 189) have all but disappeared in the capital of the Marshall Islands. Instead, what one can spot along the

Figure I.1 Hand-painted sign with the flags of RMI, Mājro and Taiwan indicating the cooperative support for a roofed basketball court (multipurpose gymnasium) and water catchment (left side of the sign) in Wūlka.

streets of Mājro are flags: next to the flag of the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), the flag of Mājro atoll and the Stars and Stripes, one can also frequently spot *hi no maru*[5], the flag of Japan, as it flanks donated school buses and rubbish bins or *qīngtiānbáirì mǎn dì hóng*[6], the flag of Taiwan ornamenting signs in front of buildings such as the International Congress Center (ICC), the hospital and playgrounds and sport facilities all over Mājro (Figure I.1).

Flags, as the most simplified and condensed form of national representation, indicate not only the flow of capital that maintains and expands Mājro's infrastructure but also the expressions of political interests in Oceania. The Marshall Islands continue to be a site of political power struggles that has most recently been exemplified in a lobbying scandal initiated by the People's Republic of China (PRC). Beginning in 2016, two Chinese individuals offered financial benefits to Marshallese politicians with the aim to establish a Semi-Autonomous Region (SAR) on the atoll of Roñļap (Rongelap). Roñļap has been uninhabitable since the US largest hydrogen bomb test, Castle Bravo, on 1 March 1954 at Pikinni (Bikini) Atoll, whose fallout resulted in deadly levels of radiation on Roñļap, Roñdik (Rongerik) and Utrōk (Utirik) (Barker 2013; Niedenthal 2002). Investigations by the US Department of

Justice identified that the bribes were implemented to change the laws on Roñļap with the aim to diminish taxes, minimise immigration restrictions and attract foreign investment (Mao 2022). Yan and Zhou, the two individuals in question, were not only able to obtain Marshallese citizenship during this time, but Yan was also officially appointed as a special advisor to the Marshall Islands by one of the compromised Marshallese officials. In 2018, a bill in support of the SAR was introduced to the *nitijeļā*, and after a political tussle between President Hilda Heine and her supporters who opposed the idea of 'a "country within a country"'(Mao 2022) and the group of bribed politicians, Yan and Zhou were detained in Thailand in 2020 and transferred to the United States in mid-2022, where they were charged with 'foreign corruption, money laundering and bribery offences' (Mao 2022). In 2023, the ensuing corruption process then resulted in the barring of former president Kessai Note and senator Mike Halferty from entering the United States (Office of the Spokesperson 2023). While the case has been a source of discussion within the RMI, it is not the first controversy in relation to questionable interests in contaminated atolls. RMI's first president, Amata Kabua, for example, proposed at the South Pacific Forum in 1994 to use the nation's radiated atolls as international nuclear waste sites (Kupferman 2011: 79–80). What these dynamics nevertheless illustrate is that history has confounded Spoehr's village-centred predictions of Mājro's development. Despite acknowledging that the 'Marshallese are a flexible people, whose very adaptability in a world of flux gives a certain stability to their culture' (Spoehr 1966: 254), he estimated that globalisation would likely 'not result in the type of urbanisation toward which various native communities located on continental land masses, such as those in Latin America, have been moving' (Spoehr 1966: 254). Neither did Spoehr recognise the possibility of Mājro turning into an urban centre within the next thirty years (see Asian Development Bank 2012; Connell 2017; DIDA 2022; Ford 2012), nor did he foresee the role of commercial ship and air traffic. The ship registry, under the 'flag of convenience' (FOC) scheme, has become the most successful business model in the Marshall Islands, by which the nation offers its flag to foreign vessels at low cost and with little to no oversight. By 2010, the RMI ship registry had grown to become the third largest in the world (Kupferman 2011), a rank that the nation has maintained in the first half of the 2020s (Rodrigue n.d.). As of 2024, more than 4,000 ships are registered in RMI (Ship Search | World Shipping Register n.d.), likely the most infamous among them the Deepwater Horizon oil platform which caused the 2010 BP oil spill (Kupferman 2011: 87). The Marshall Islands' influential position within the global shipping industry contrasts Spoehr's doubt that 'in the predictable future the Marshalls will be affected by the development of commercial transpacific air and ship routes' (Spoehr 1966: 254–55) and that military aviation as 'a vehicle of culture contact' would likely have minimal effects (Spoehr 1966: 255).

The rapid dynamics of globalisation that have restructured Mājro can neither solely be understood through the standards of continental dwelling nor outdated notions of remoteness and isolation (Linckens 1911; Spoehr 1966). This is especially exemplified in Spoehr's arbitrary framing of the ocean and lagoon as avenues for mobility and communication and then in other instances as barriers that isolate communities from each other (see also Hau'ofa 1994). His view of the atoll is limited to continental parameters that treat land and sea as clearly separate entities, where the concept of land in Mājro 'as on all atolls' is confined to being a limited resource (Spoehr 1966: 160) rather than an element within a synergetic relationship between coral and the sea. For Spoehr, water does not enrich the atoll but confines it. Oceanic epistemologies that directly draw on the region's indigenous wisdom have since relativised such notions and demonstrate that there is no difference between the ocean and land, as they either can occur in harmonious unity or dynamically mirror and rely on each other (Ingersoll 2016: 88). In other words, Oceanic societies offer long histories of spiritually and practically mastering the implications of living in-between complex sets of spatial and material conditions that not only facilitate an understanding but also the development of resilient strategies for the postmodern challenges of liminality (see Pugh and Chandler 2021; Thomassen 2016). Western geography, in contrast, has established borderlines as 'setting off land from sea, marking presumed political boundaries, establishing limits and identities' they often disempower 'Oceanic countries and peoples' (Hess 2004: 184). Jessica Schwartz challenges such harmful framings of Oceania through an 'atollscape epistemology' consisting of 'atoll umbilicals' that function as 'nourishing threads, waves, and currents of Marshallese navigational sensibilities that network the archipelago via circulations, gatherings, and distributions (vocal currency)' (Schwartz 2021: 36). This focus on the umbilical metaphor is informed by *bwij*, the Marshallese matrilineal lineage according to which land rights and ownership are passed down through generations. In this context, Schwartz highlights the push and pull between the globalising electricity and internet 'cable umbilicals' of 'Western sovereignty' that produce 'individualized subjects whose sociality is mass mediated' and the 'atoll umbilicals' and '*ainikien* (sound) umbilicals' that structure Marshallese culture and society through sonic practices such as singing, chanting and storytelling (Schwartz 2021: 34). Jim Hess describes how in the early 1990s the cable TV station in Mājro supplied subscribers with 'week-old programs shipped in from a San Francisco cable operator' (Hess 2004: 189). In the neighbouring atoll Arṇo, he also found that some radio enthusiasts install antennas on tall palms and employ powerful amplifiers to capture signals from Guam, Hawai'i or Australia (Hess 2004: 190). Hess' description, albeit formed earlier than the notion of 'cable umbilicals' paints a more complex picture of the technological impact that globalisation had on the RMI in the years following WWII. Marshallese citizens are not passive recipients on the sidelines of globalisation

but actors within its centre (see Hess 2004: 184). The adoption of technologies such as the radio and the internet are not one-dimensional in the sense that they only result in mass-mediated individualism (Schwartz 2021: 34) but also facilitate communal Marshallese self-empowerment and the challenge of looming notions of isolation, for example, in the shape of message boards and Facebook groups (see Hess 2004: 191; Republic of the Marshall Islands: Buy, Sell, Trade, Community Forum 2025).

While Marshallese voices and activism continue to go up against the violence of such artificial divisions (Barker 2013; Johnson 2013; Schwartz 2021), this book provides a meso and micro focus on how spatial and material boundaries are transgressed through sound in everyday life. Mājro exemplifies here that 'islands have emerged as key sites for understanding relational entanglements which have come to the forefront in the search for alternative forms of thought and practice in the Anthropocene' (Pugh and Chandler 2021: 4). These thoughts and practices challenge 'islandness' (Diaz 2011: 28) as a product of self-interested continental thinking that oppresses through redefining indigenous subjective sovereignty of cultural junctions, historic continuity and the connection to the sea and land as a synergetic entity. Following Vicente M. Diaz notion that 'no island is an island' (Diaz 2011: 28) implicates that no island can be fully reduced to the continental features of a village, town or city (Spoehr 1966). As a white and male Anglo-German, I neither am nor want to be put in a position in which I am expected to ontologically conceptualise islands from the ground up. By proposing that some aspects of everyday life can be grasped by understanding Mājro as an urban atoll (see Campbell 2019, 6; Ford 2012), I suggest a way to describe it as a multi-faceted site of the Anthropocene. While acknowledging the artificial perspective of 'islandness' that Diaz critically unveils, I seek to highlight that globalisation has not only reshaped the environment and everyday life in Mājro through urbanisation but also explore how its community constantly adapts to generate *m̧ōņōņōū* (happiness, joy) in their everyday life. Despite capitalism's threat of immortality (see Fisher 2009), Mājro's current state as a globalised urban atoll is temporary; it is one of its many forms since humans first set foot on its shores. Nevertheless, since the RMI promulgated its statehood through a constitution in 1979 (Kupferman 2011: 75), Mājro has become the nation's principal site of political administration and trade. With about 23,000 residents as of 2021 (Economic Policy, Planning and Statistics Office 2023), the atoll is no longer just 'a village in the Marshall Islands' (Spoehr 1966) but the capital of a self-governed nation that most Marshallese citizens reside in. Jim Hess (2004: 191) demonstrates that by 1988 already two-thirds of counted Marshallese citizens were living in the capital, which starkly contrasts the accounts by Spoehr, who notes that Laura, on the widest land expansion in the western end of the atoll, hosted in the 1940s around '850 persons; certainly not more than 900' (Spoehr 1966: 29). Mājro's population trajectory, however, also outlines the nation's overall population decline. Nevertheless, between 2011 and 2021, the number of

residents in Mājro decreased by about five thousand people (Mortreux et al. 2023) due to outmigration to Hawai'i and the continental United States, indicating that Mājro attracts not only national immigration from other atolls but also functions as a stepping stone for citizens leaving the nation. Especially secondary education requires mobility, as high schools are concentrated in Mājro, Epjā (Ebeye), Wōjjā (Wotje) and Jālwōj (see Hess 2004: 191). The main campus of the College of the Marshall Islands (CMI), for example, the country's single higher educational institution, is located in Mājro's business district, requiring students from other atolls to relocate. Cruise ships and military vessels such as the hospital ship USNS Mercy in 2023 (U. S. Naval Institute Staff 2023) docking in Mājro in irregular intervals affect its commercial neighbourhoods Delap-Uliga-Darrit (D-U-D) with notable increases in retail across supermarkets, bars and restaurants as well as pedestrian and car traffic. Similarly, international events have had a significant influence on urban design, as the 1996 South Pacific Forum required the construction of the atoll's largest hotel, featuring 150 rooms. For the 2024 Micronesia Games, a six million USD Olympic-grade multipurpose sports complex was erected in the neighbourhood of Jeṇrōk which is now used for events and as a sports park (Hosia 2019; Yurri Patan 2024). Mājro's post-war urbanisation is on the surface embodied in the distribution and style of its architecture, which has completely abandoned the Marshallese way of building structures from local materials like pandanus and palm leaves that are well-adapted to the climate and the geological structure of the coral reef. While Spoehr describes that thatch houses predominated after WWII, in 1947, most houses were 'probably more European than Marshallese' (Spoehr 1966: 67–68) with 'sawed lumber sides' stemming from 'Navy salvage' (Spoehr 1966: 51). Jim Hess confirms that in the early 1990s, the 'material environment is decidedly unlike those images of thatched huts and grass skirts that romantic tales set in the Pacific bring to mind' (Hess 2004: 187). Houses in non-urban atolls such as Arṇo (Arno) are also constructed from plywood and feature tin roofs, while the flooring is commonly created through a concrete slab or patch of coral gravel (Hess 2004: 189). In Mājro, the variety of housing is based on available materials and labour force, ranging from plywood shacks with corrugated metal sheet roofs to multi-storey office buildings to a few sprawling residencies and even shipping containers built as expansions into existing housing structures. This diversity fits with Henri Lefebvre's experiential understanding of the urban as forming spaces where people 'find themselves standing before and inside piles of objects' while experiencing their activities as correlating 'until they become unrecognizable, entangle situations in such a way that they engender unexpected situations' (Lefebvre 2011: 39). As a 'crossroads of people on commercial and official business, people just passing through, outsiders who have settled down' (Hess 2004: 190), Mājro exists between the dynamic qualities of its coral reef and the continental cityscape that has been built on top of it. The Mājro of the 21st century embodies the entanglements of Oceanic life in the Anthropocene as it not only shares a

globalisation trajectory with numerous urban centres in Oceania but also the dynamics of the Great Acceleration with an increased focus on urbanity across the globe since the end of WWII (Ritchie, Samborska, and Roser 2024; Steffen, Crutzen, and McNeill 2007). It exists in a liminal space between the traditions of Marshallese culture, global trade, the challenges of climate change and political power play.

0.2 The Scope of This Book

This book is based on a six-month research stay in Mājro between October 2023 and April 2024. With the support of the Cultural and Historic Preservation Office in Mājro, I recorded approximately a combined number of 100 video and audio recordings of urban and liminal spaces as well as places that the local community uses to play. I approached the recording gear through the method of slow cinema, especially drawing on James Benning's work (Lübecker and Rugo 2018). Benning's oeuvre is associated with a minimalist film style comparable to the late work of Yasujirō Ozu, consisting of long-duration shots without any camera movement created by mounting a camera on a tripod. I selected the locations for recording based on conversations with locals and their recommendations and through explorative walks and drives throughout the atoll. Recording sessions usually coincided with participant observation sessions that I conducted recurringly on different days of the week and at different times of the day to gain insights on the dynamics of traffic and use of the spaces. I shared the resulting recordings that document everyday life in Mājro with the local archive at the Alele museum. Numerous informal conversations with locals and visitors and a series of semi-structured interviews with ten interviewees form the qualitative basis of what I write in the following chapters. Chiefly, I set out in this book to trace how urban design and imported continental architecture have created liminal spaces in Mājro and how these spaces are officially and unofficially appropriated by the local communities for their wellbeing. In the six months that I spent in Mājro, I experienced it as an *urban atoll*, that is, as an assemblage of cultural and material qualities that I explore in this book through the dimension of sound. I am aware that the urban has no equivalent in the Marshallese language; I nevertheless think that the term holds enough flexibility to grasp how Mājro's present community creates the atoll as *jikin kweḷọk* in a literal sense, that is, as a place of communal sociality that transgresses the imported confinements of abstract continental urban space. I understand Mājro as liminal in the sense that it oscillates between *jikin kweḷọk*, the mobile relationship between the *pedped* (reef, foundation, base), *lọṃaḷo* (lagoon), *lọjet* (ocean) (see Diaz 2011: 28) and the dynamics of global economic trade, mobility and politics.

This book is structured in four chapters. The first chapter discusses a scope of existing scholarship on liminality in the Anthropocene. The relationship between sound and space is contextualised through the concept of affordances.

Etal iene, the Marshallese expression for walking between islands of an *aelōñ* at low tide, illustrates here that the sonic and material boundaries of everyday life in Mājro are fluid. The second chapter centres around *m̧ōņōņōū*, the Marshallese expression of joy and happiness. It traces discourses on wellbeing through contextualising subjective wellbeing (SWB) with sport and play as well as indigenous research on community-focused wellbeing. While SWB is often evaluated after the fact through verbal accounts, I argue that *ainikien* (sound, voice) as vibratory labour (LaBelle 2010), for example, of the *bōro* (throat), is a salient indicator for identifying *m̧ōņōņōū*. I problematise that existing theories on sound and urban space, such as acoustic territories (LaBelle 2010) and the auditory bubble (Bull 2005, 2006), are limited by their assumption of a clear and sturdy demarcation between public and private space. To demonstrate how *ainikien* is used in Mājro to transgress spatial and material boundaries, I draw on sound knowledge as an embodied passageway of perceiving and understanding oneself and the environment (Abels 2022). *Ainikien*, reflecting the relational entanglements of currents and vibration (see Schwartz 2021), forms the basis from which I develop the notion of the sonic cocoon as a communal method for appropriating liminal space. In the final section of the chapter, I will develop a methodology for tracing these relational entanglements in various contexts called the sono-material affordance circuit. The third chapter investigates three case studies, an improvised ball court erected behind the abandoned capitol building in the central district of Mājro and the Iakwe Katoj and Airport Beach Park, two official recreational spaces at the outskirts of the airport's airstrip and a small beach in Wūlka, Mājro's commercial district. The chapter evaluates how the affordances of various spaces change, are lost and are appropriated in everyday life in Mājro through *ainikien*. The fourth chapter focuses on Lagoon Road, Mājro's principal mode of everyday mobility and the atoll's most frequented liminal space. Through different case studies such as the Christmas jebta celebrations and New Year's block party in Wūlka as well as the various float parades that take place on Lagoon Road throughout the year, the chapter traces forms of ludic appropriation. The second half of the chapter focuses on taxi drivers as concrete wave pilots of the urban atoll, emphasising that sonic cocoons are also mobile and not limited to fixed locations. The eclectic scope of this book will likely raise a healthy number of eyebrows. It is the result of tackling liminality, a notoriously impalpable phenomenon, not through a historic analysis and projection, but through a focus on Oceanic lives that all too often are bracketed out in the scope of contemporary analysis. I am trying my best throughout this book to not reproduce the harmful notions of islandness and remoteness that have been plaguing Oceania since colonialism first reared its ugly head. If anything, this book documents an attempt at highlighting the value of creating Marshallese *m̧ōņōņōū* in the fleeting and often-overlooked moments of everyday life. I am convinced that the forms of happiness born in these situations are one of the strongest forms of resilience that humans can achieve, even amidst the direst of challenges.

Notes

1 English: atoll, town, place of assembly – All Marshallese terms follow the Marshallese-English Online Dictionary (MOD) (Republic of the Marshall Islands Environment Data Portal 2022). Marshallese terms are italicised; place names are written in Marshallese with their English equivalents placed in parenthesis at first mention.
2 Der Hauptort (Hauptstadt wäre zuviel gesagt) der Marshall Inseln wird Jaluit genannt, wenn auch das Dorf der Eingeborenen, das eigentlich diesen Namen trägt, ungefähr vier Stunden südlicher liegt. – Translation by the author
3 idyllische Unordnung – Translation by the author
4 in armseligen Hütten – Translation by the author
5 日の丸 – ball of the sun
6 青天白日滿地紅 – blue sky, white sun, and a wholly red earth

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1 Etal Iene

Walking Between Islands

I sit on a floodwall at the end of the neighbourhood and look over to the adjacent island *Pikeel-eañ* rising on the horizon like a green fortress. It is low tide this evening, but there is still sea water floating on the flat section of the coral reef that connects the islets. I heard that sharks like to hunt here. Two people leave the house behind me, and we greet each other with a friendly '*iọkwe*'. They walk down the stairs next to the wall on which I sit, reach the rocky coral reef and start moving towards the ocean. After several hundred metres, they turn left and begin crossing the reef through the water, walking carefully but steadily. Suddenly, there is another friendly 'hello!' behind me, this time in English. Two tourists have arrived with a taxi and set out to walk the same route through the space between the two islands. Instead of veering towards the ocean first, where the reef is higher and the water shallower, they cut through the space halfway, seemingly getting stuck between the islands while walking through the deeper water (Figures 1.1 and 1.2).

Etal iene (walk islands) is the Marshallese expression for walking on the reef between islands at low tide, the area that is completely submerged in ocean water during high tide. Traversing liminal, that is, in-between spaces is an integral part of everyday life for people in the Marshall Islands. It is a mundane aspect that nevertheless illustrates how other contexts of liminality are used and made sense of in Mājro. Using *etal iene* as a frame, this chapter addresses liminality in four parts: the first section critically traces Jonathan Pugh and David Chandler's understanding of islands as 'important liminal and transgressive spaces […] from which a great deal of Anthropocene thinking is drawing out and developing alternatives to hegemonic, modern, "mainland" or "one world" thinking' (Pugh and Chandler 2021: 2). Through probing the idea of Anthropocene islands, I describe Mājro's present state as liminal in the sense that it moves *jāpo* (in between) the states of urban atoll and *jikin kwelọk*, a place of social assembly. As an island in the Anthropocene, that is, a space shifting between coral reef, lagoon, ocean and a cityscape shaped after North American continental standards. It forces its inhabitants to continuously negotiate the cultural friction between traditional values, globalised contestability and climate change preparation (see Caldwell 2015; Davoudi 2010; Government of the Republic of the Marshall Islands 2018). Theories

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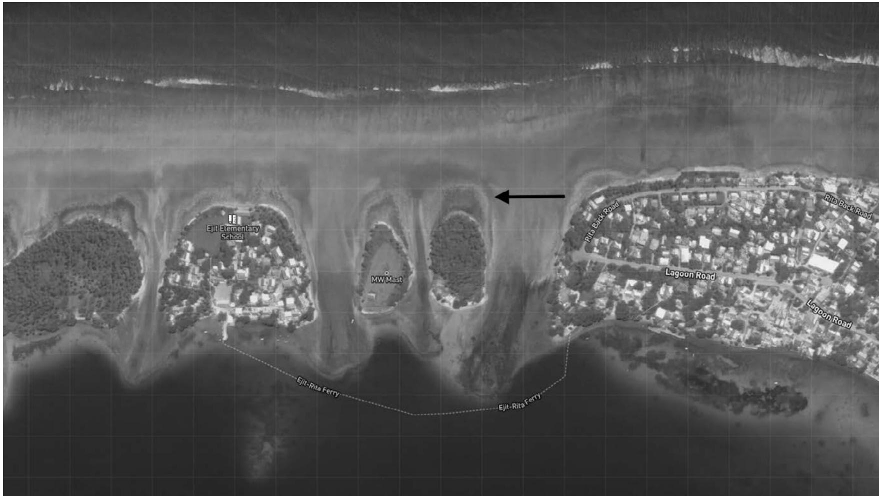

Figure 1.1 and 1.2 etal iene: Walking between islands during low tide. The arrow indicates the location where locals walk across the reef.

like liquid modernity (Bauman 2013) describe comparable patterns; however, I argue that the Anthropocene as a discursive combination of globalisation, datafication and climate change dynamics highlights relevant aspects of everyday life in Mājro. The second section explores concepts of liminality and contextualises them with Marshallese notions of *jāpo*. In it, I argue that liminality characterises the Anthropocene not only spatially through non-places

(Augé 2008), such as backroads and parking lots, but also socioeconomically in the forms of precarity, migration and mobility (see Standing 2016; Thomassen 2016). These intersectional characteristics of liminality are highlighted in the context of the recent 'chromatic turn' (O'Connor et al. 2025) in the humanities, which sees a growing number of scholarship exploring leisure and wellbeing in grey, blue and green spaces through a lens of 'polluted leisure' (Cherrington and Black 2020; Evers 2019, 2023; O'Connor 2024; O'Connor et al. 2022; Olive 2023). The third section traces how sound studies have conceptualised the relationship between sound, space and liminality, for which it uses Murray Schafer's 'soundscape' (1993) as a critical point of departure. I argue here that sound studies has so far not sufficiently addressed how liminality sonically manifests in everyday life. In section four, I draw on the concept of affordances (Gibson 2015) and its contextualisation with the sounds of urban space as a basis for exploring how sound is used in Mājro's liminal spaces. The theoretical evaluations presented in this chapter create the foundation for the development of ludic appropriation and the sonic cocoon in Chapter 2 as an analytical basis for the case studies discussed in Chapters 3 and 4.

1.1 The Liminal Anthropocene

Since the beginning of the new Millennium, a multidisciplinary group of scientists has been discussing the implementation of a new geological age: the 'Anthropocene' as 'the moment in time when humans have altered the world to the point that our presence on earth has been permanently inscribed onto the sedimentary record of the planet and possibly beyond' (Jackson 2017: 45). In 2002, the atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen noted that due to anthropogenic carbon dioxide emissions, 'global climate may depart significantly from natural behaviour for many millennia to come' and first argued for calling the present era the Anthropocene to supplement the Holocene, 'the warm period of the past 10–12 millennia' (Crutzen 2002: 23). As is the case with other geological epochs, dating the onset of the Anthropocene is disputed (Edgeworth et al. 2015) and Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer locate its beginning in the second half of the 18th century, as data extracted from glacial ice cores indicates an accumulation of carbon dioxide and methane in the atmosphere coinciding with James Watt's invention of the steam engine in 1784 (Crutzen and Stoermer 2010). The 'Anthropocene Working Group', a now-defunct research cluster in the Subcommission on Quaternary Stratigraphy (Working Group on the 'Anthropocene' 2024), has argued for a different beginning of the Anthropocene that coincides with the detonation of the world's first nuclear bomb, Trinity, on 16 July 1945 at Alamogordo, New Mexico (Zalasiewicz et al. 2015). Throughout the 20th century, additional bomb tests were conducted at a rate of one every 9.6 days, including 67 tests in the Marshall Islands at Pikinni and Āne-wātak (Enewetak) atoll, displacing and poisoning Marshallese citizens and their land and sea (Johnston and Barker 2008; Niedenthal 2002; Parsons and Zaballa 2017). Nuclear

fallout deposits have since become 'easily identifiable in the chemostratigraphic record' (Zalasiewicz et al. 2015:196), indicating a clear demarcation line between the previous eras and the beginning of the atomic age. Other scholars argue for understanding the Anthropocene as an effect of the 'Great Acceleration' which has seen the human population growing to over 6 billion and the global economy multiplying 15-fold between the end of WWII and the turn of the Millennium. An indicator for this human impact is the number of motorised vehicles, which has risen sharply from 'from about 40 million at the end of the War to nearly 700 million by 1996' (Steffen et al. 2007: 617), a trajectory that also has left its imprint on Mājro (see Chapter 4). Crutzen notes that a 'daunting task lies ahead for scientists and engineers to guide society towards environmentally sustainable management during the era of the Anthropocene' (Crutzen 2002: 23). And indeed, concomitant with the detrimental effects of global warming, the discourse surrounding the Anthropocene has grown more heated since the idea was first publicised in the early 2000s.

Jonathan Pugh and David Chandler propose a noteworthy contribution to this debate, as they seek to return the focus of attention to the islands where the atomic age unfolded its destructive forces. They argue that islands have become the key sites of confrontation and eco-political crises in the Anthropocene (Pugh and Chandler 2021: 4). Their constantly morphing states under the influence of environmental conditions (Kench et al. 2018) exemplify that 'all life in the Anthropocene is relationally entangled and co-dependent' (Pugh and Chandler 2021: 2), resonating with Vicente M. Diaz's understanding of islands as mobile, expanding and contracting and having coordinates according to the farthest reaches of their indigenous creatures (Diaz 2011: 28). This repositioning of islands as central to 'understanding relational entanglements which have come to the forefront in the search for alternative forms of thought and practice in the Anthropocene' (Pugh and Chandler 2021: 4) challenges the colonial legacies of perspectives on islands as isolated and primitive (Erdland 1914; Krämer, Nevermann, and Hamburgische Wissenschaftliche Stiftung 1938). As soon as the complex relationships of islands are not simplified through colonial narratives, they 'can be understood as important seeds for the conceptualisation of the Anthropocene; a liminal entry point for wider contemporary forms of thought' (Pugh and Chandler 2021: 6) that reject the artificial human/nature divide (see Crane and Patterson 2012; Latour 2021) and embrace the chaotic 'relational entanglements, feedbacks and weird reworkings of relations across time and space' (Pugh and Chandler 2021: 186–87).

This embrace creates a 'disruptive continuum' (Pugh and Chandler 2021: 20) of theories on resilience, patchwork ontologies, correlation and storiation. Resilience views islands as self-regulating systems based on adaptive and non-linear knowledge of progress and sustainability (Pugh and Chandler 2021: 10; see also Diaz 2018). In patchwork ontologies, 'the world dissipates into patchworks of islands of relational co-entanglements and affects, so that drawing upon islands in this way becomes the ontology of the world' (Pugh

and Chandler 2021: 15; see also Glissant 1997; Teaiwa 2001, 2008, 2022). Through a patchwork lens, islands are understood as the sites of non-linear processes of worlding that make use of elements such as sound and music (see Abels 2022a). Correlation and storiation are onto-epistemologically unsettling in the sense that they transgress the modernist notion of knowledge resulting from a meta-perspective reflection. Instead, knowledge is treated as inextricable from the entanglements of being in the world (see Pugh and Chandler 2021: 19). While *Anthropocene Islands* delivers an eclectic theoretical framework for criticising the enduring modernist fallacies in the understanding of islands and island nations, its application of liminality is cleaving to modernist dualisms that Pugh and Chandler claim to overcome. They consider islands as 'liminal sites of modernity' (Pugh and Chandler 2021: xi) that sometimes are framed as the 'positionality of islands within modernity – as part of the world but excluded from linear and universalist imaginaries of progress and civilisation' (Pugh and Chandler 2021: 180). In other parts of their work, islands are located in the 'liminal "outside" of modernity; which is today being repositioned as central for moving beyond the limitations of modernist understandings of ontology and epistemology' (Pugh and Chandler 2021: 164). Liminality as the spatial and socio-political condition of life in the Anthropocene, however, is not limited to a dualist sense of being either *inside* or *outside* clearly circumscribed states but specifically addresses the vagueness of existing between states (see Thomassen 2016). By equating liminality with the exteriority of modernity, that is, by treating it as marginality, Pugh and Chandler fall into the very trap of dualist modernist thought that they seek to relativise. Bjørn Thomassen (2016), who presents the most comprehensive engagement with liminality in modern time, notes that it is necessary to clearly delimitate liminality from marginality. Although the two phenomena share certain qualities by being concepts on boundary dynamics, they fundamentally differ in their scope: 'that which is interstitial is neither marginal nor on the outside; liminality refers, quite literally, to something placed in an in-between position' (Thomassen 2016: 7–8). Considering Thomassen's understanding as a salient approach to liminality and basis for critically evaluating Pugh and Chandler's work, I argue that Anthropocene Islands presents a collection of meta-considerations for solidifying the argument *that* islands exist after the end of modernity rather than qualitatively exploring in more detail *how* islands presently exist. Pugh and Chandler nevertheless pose an important question: 'How does the liminality of the island for modernist thought endow the island figure with certain powers and affordances?' (Pugh and Chandler 2021: 191). What I present in the following is my attempt at addressing this question in a way that does not merely tolerate but works *with* and *through* the ambiguity that liminality bestows on everyday life. Mājro is then not an Anthropocene island in the sense that it exemplifies postmodern epistemology. Rather, it is an island in the Anthropocene moving between an array of diverse and contradictory sono-material qualities and desires. Like many contemporary urban centres in the Pacific (see Abels 2022a), it exists in an opaque space between

city and atoll, between cultural tradition and globalisation. In short, Mājro exists in a liminal space.

Numerous Marshallese terms describe things being *jāpo*, in-between, ranging from spatial to temporal and social. Spatial terms, for example, refer to locations on the atoll and constructional dimensions of *wa*, Marshallese outrigger canoes, including the large *walap* and *tipñōl* sailing canoes and the smaller *kōrkōr* paddling canoe (see Genz 2008, 2011, 2014, 2018). On the *aelōñ* (atoll), *wea* indicates a small passage between ocean and lagoon, while *mej* and *mejje* describe the same space but highlight the direction that demarcates the opening between islets where *etal iene* takes place at low tide. *Toṇak* describes a clearing between trees that grow in opposite directions, *tuwa* is a small space between trees and *kōḷọtuwawa* means seeing somebody pass through trees. General directions and indicators for navigation frequently refer to passageways between the ocean and the lagoon, like *to*, the passage into lagoon from the side of the ocean and *ḷooribeb* the technique of following a large wave when entering a lagoon. Navigating the shallow water on the reef between the ocean and lagoon can be challenging, as it creates erratic wave patterns and the danger of scraping the bow of a vessel over the reef. *Wāwe* indicates this practice of passing between reefs or heavy seas, where Marshallese wave pilots (see Langlois 2016) use their sense of *mooḷ*, the period of waves between a succession of larger waves. In a larger temporal context, *aeṃṃan* refers to the time between tides, *jo* to the period between stormy seasons, *meḷa* to a gap between rain showers and *meḷoktak* to the second moon phase or the period between the sun setting and the moon rising (Marshallese-English Online Dictionary (MOD) 2022). While concepts that specifically use the term liminality rarely extend beyond the realm of Anglophone academia[1], these terms indicate that a wide scope of in-between states and characteristics is rooted in the Marshallese understanding and use of atoll and oceanscapes. The liminal, stemming from the Latin word *limen* for boundary or threshold, as characterised by 'being transitional or intermediate between two states, situations, etc.' (liminal, adj. meanings, etymology and more | Oxford English Dictionary 2025) has garnered attention amidst the 'spatial turn' in the humanities (Sheller 2017). The term's ambiguity is rooted in its potential for wide application, as it addresses individuals, social groups, entire societies and temporal dimensions ranging from moments to periods and epochs (Thomassen 2016: 89). Spatially, liminality manifests on a micro level in thresholds between specific places like doorsteps or areas of the human body (see Stenning 2025). On a meso-level, it encompasses border zones between nations, prisons and seaports (see McDuie-Ra 2016), and on a macro-level, nations or larger areas such as Mesopotamia or the Mediterranean (Thomassen 2016: 91). Liminality was first conceptualised in cultural anthropology by Arnold Van Gennep (2001) who categorises rites of passages in socialisation processes as pre-liminal separation rites, liminal transition rites and post-liminal incorporation rites. Victor Turner draws on Van Gennep's work to investigate liminal transition periods between initiation rites and ambiguity following the departure of a milieu or

life stage (Turner 2016; Turner and Abrahams 2017). While this transition has the potential to cause identity crises, liminality also implicates a freedom that subverts social division, responsibility and hierarchy (Whyte 2004: 350). A foray into spatial liminality in relation to seascapes is Robert Preston-Whyte's (2004) exploration of the beach as 'a space that is neither land nor sea, a zone of uncertainty that resonates with the sound of everchanging seas, [...] a borderland that allows both difference and hybridity while facilitating the tactile tug of land or sea to reveal for many, but not all, spaces of heightened sensibilities that are temporary, personal, and elusive – in short, liminal spaces' (Preston Whyte 2004: 349). Preston-Whyte delivers an analysis of primarily Anglo-Saxon and white use of beaches (see Burdsey 2016) while exploring practices such as surfing and the struggles of nudist beaches for legal recognition. Although describing liminality as an 'elusive concept' (Preston Whyte 2004: 349), he calls on scholars to expand the understanding of liminal spaces 'from wild, deserted, and remote beaches to those along settled coastlines' (Preston Whyte 2004: 351).

Addressing liminality in such a context requires an understanding of the difference between space and place. Across indigenous studies and human geography, places are associated with familiar locations, dwellings and social connectedness, while space is used in a broad sense, especially when describing unknown or abstract characteristics (see Basso 1996; Cresswell 2015; Tuan 2002). In everyday English, it is therefore common to refer to one's home as a 'place of comfort' rather than a 'space of comfort'. Similarly, visitors to Mājro, especially from continental countries, will likely describe the lagoon in the centre of the atoll as a 'wide open space' rather than a 'wide open place'. Nevertheless, for the locals living with and through the lagoon in a three-dimensional way, for example, by diving and fishing below its surface, it is sensible to speak of the lagoon as a place to fish, a place to go diving, a place that is part of home and so on. Sound is essential for the different perceptions of space and place, as it indicates the merging, mingling and collision of different forms of spatial use. Sophie Arkette (2004) argues that urban space is shaped through social practices with 'significant implications for understanding the role of sound as a component of urban experience' (Arkette 2004: 160). To grasp the significance of sound in shaping the experience of urbanity, she suggests adopting a buoyant understanding of place rooted in everyday life rather than an abstract notion of ontological space. Framed as place, locales are set in relation with their unique history, 'cultural meanings and values' while they are simultaneously made available for 'active intervention and transformation' (Arkette 2004: 160). This relationship between humans and the places they inhabit is reciprocal, as phenomena such as the sick building syndrome cause headaches and respiratory issues due to toxic materials used in construction and renovation (Al Momani and Hikmat 2008; see also Gardener and Lemes De Oliveira 2020; Kim and Yoo 2019; Krefis et al. 2018). Negative impacts of space and place can also be found in the work of Marc Augé (2008), who argues that accelerated trade and mobility in the wake of globalisation have

resulted in the mass creation of what he calls 'non-places'. In line with Arkette, Augé treats place as defined by culturally relational, historical and identity-establishing qualities, aspects that rationalised and standardised non-places lack (Augé 2008: 77–78). Highways, railways, interchanges and airports are examples of non-places, as are 'the great commercial centres, or the extended transit camps where the planet's refugees are parked' (Augé 2008: 34). A key argument of Augé's work is that the non-places produced in the present era, which he calls 'supermodernity', are devoid of a human touch and therefore anthropologically irrelevant (Augé 2008: 78). Almost 20 years after its first publication and an ever more evolving nexus of streamlined and standardised architecture creating non-places around the world, Augé's dismissal appears premature. It appears to be ignoring the fact that humans are the only life form on earth capable of conceiving and intentionally exposing themselves to non-places. Especially the playful adoption of non-places is relevant here, a phenomenon that in more recent times has been productively conceptualised through the lens of polluted leisure (Evers 2019).

The intersectional aspects of space as a socially produced dimension (Lefebvre 1991, 2024) of life in the Anthropocene have recently been explored through a 'chromatic turn' (O'Connor et al. 2025), which critically evaluates the use of space in relation to chromatic characteristics. Seascapes are explored as blue spaces, bush and forest as green spaces and cities as concrete grey spaces. Several of these investigations scrutinise the environmental impact and health effects of leisure in blue and green spaces (Britton et al. 2020; Buser et al. 2020; Cherrington and Black 2020; De Sousa 2004; King and Dickinson 2023; Olive 2023; Wheaton et al. 2020). A salient approach for analysing liminality as the dynamic intersection of grey, green and blue spaces, however, consists in the concept of polluted leisure (Evers 2019, 2023, 2024). Clifton Evers frames polluted leisure as 'the embodied, sensorial, emotional, intellectual, spatial, and technological occurrences of pollution as it mingles with leisure' (Evers 2019, 2023: 1). From the perspective of surf studies, Evers explores polluted leisure in seascape 'wastelands' (Evers 2024) as not only toxic blue spaces but also 'shadow places' (Plumwood 2008) hosting the leftover traces of colonial abuse, war and economic greed. In the context of the cityscape, Paul O'Connor et al. (2022) argue that the use of urban space through practices like skateboarding is conditioned by concrete as the 'anthropogenic rock of modernity' (O'Connor 2024: 2), rendering such forms of play grey polluted leisure. Grey spaces display two key characteristics that locate them within the scope of liminality: they mark a conceptually 'ambiguous in-between zone of shading, ambivalence, nuances, liminality, contradictions and paradoxes that put questions to social power arrangements' (O'Connor et al. 2022: 2). Furthermore, they focus on the 'skin of the city' (O'Connor et al. 2022: 2) created through artificial materials like concrete, steel and asphalt in the 'liminal "grey" space between the ordered use of urban zones for the functioning of capitalism and the articulation of spaces for ludic opportunities' (O'Connor et al. 2022: 6). By embracing urban liminality, grey spaces subvert not only Augé's notion that

non-places are anthropologically irrelevant (Augé 2008: 78), but also reductive categorisations of grey spaces as per se unhealthy and green and blue spaces as per se healthy. Skateboarders gain wellbeing in the polluted urban environment through their reciprocal use of grey materiality that makes them 'at once subjects *of* and contributors *to* pollution' (O'Connor 2024: 2 original italicisation). Polluted leisure in grey spaces offers an analytical perspective 'that embraces nuance and ambiguity' while redressing 'dominant orientations of urban infrastructure, leisure, and play spaces theorised from, and constrained by, the Global North' (O'Connor 2024: 5). Exemplified in explorations such as Brian Glenney's (2023) research on skateparks built as concrete caps over toxic landfills, skateboarders 'occupy a liminal space as mediators of pollution, working with spaces that are problematic socially and adopting them as ludic' (O'Connor 2024: 9). Grey spaces have been recently explored through children's play (Stenning 2025), rooftop exploration (Karas 2024) and the play of Roma children among waste and dangerous people (Elmas and Açıkgöz 2025). While the liminality of grey spaces is frequently implicit in these studies, I argue that the full analytical strength of the concept only unfolds once liminality is explicitly situated and approached through its sonic qualities.

This is especially necessary, as studies that explicitly address how liminality and its perception are shaped through sound are few and far between; Ed Cooper's exploration of rough sleepers' perception of sound in liminal spaces and life stages is a notable example among the few existing ones. Focusing on Great Britain, Cooper traces how rough sleepers' dwelling in open urban space is interrupted and then subjected to a bureaucratic system that funnels their complex situations into a standardised label of liminal life stage. People then frequently transition to temporary stays in so-called halfway houses that function as shelters for guiding people away from living in the streets and reintegrating them into the circuits of what the British majority deems a functional lifestyle. Inside the halfway houses, sound constitutes an impactful constant that not only creates social bonds but also maintains wellbeing and protects from trauma and self-destructive behaviour. Cooper suggests that 'homeless individuals' interaction with sound might not be the same as that of a member of mainstream society, and therefore worthy of inquiry' (Cooper 2021: 97). Once settled into a halfway house, residents use their exposure to sound as a strategy for structuring their day, while the 'quietness afforded to the residents during their time at St. Mark's House can be understood as an offer of a transient sense of stability within an overarching narrative of change and betweenness' (Cooper 2021: 99). Following Michael Bull's (2005) claim that sound effectively personalises space, Cooper notes that the residents of hallway houses use sound as 'an attempt to manipulate the personal passage of time in order to relieve the boredom intertwined with their situation and, one might posit, an attempt to alleviate loneliness' (Cooper 2021: 101; see also Rasmussen 2008). The relationship between sound and liminality highlights in these instances the 'temporal scales of change and acceleration that extend far beyond human being and brings new rhythms into our everyday lives at

paces that often feel as though we are just barely keeping up' (Jackson 2017: 57). Without a doubt, this relationship requires further scrutiny; sound studies have produced a substantial body of work that explores sound and space.

1.2 Sounds Like Liminality

In 'the Audible Anthropocene', Quinn et al. (2023) highlight that the current period 'reflects an audible shift at local and global extents' requiring an interdisciplinary expansion and adaptation to 'means of tracking, investigating, and grappling with sound and other measures of local, regional, and global change during the Anthropocene that cannot be resolved by any single discipline' (Quinn et al. 2023: 238). This is emphasised by sound functioning as a 'transformative boundary object', that can coordinate practices across varying social strata (Tsurusaki et al. 2013: 6). Boundary objects, however, do not function as actants in a Latourian sense (Latour 1996), but rather 'bridge communities in the ways they are taken up by the members of the different communities' (Tsurusaki et al. 2013: 7). C.P. Lee contends that boundary objects 'can be used to push boundaries rather than merely sailing across them' (Lee 2007: 308). Since the end of the 20th century, academics and artists have embraced the study of sound as a boundary object and created the field of sound studies around the questions of: 'what does sound mean?' and 'What models exist for studying sound?' (Kelman 2010: 213–14). Attempts at answering these questions take shape concomitantly with an 'ontological turn' (Kane 2015; see also Bråten 2022) that uses sound as a stepping stone for reconsidering the foundation of how humans perceive and make sense of their lived-in world (see Abels 2022b; Goodman 2010; Kelman 2010: 215; LaBelle 2010). Various concepts for describing the relationships between, being, knowing, sound and space have emerged in this nexus, ranging from soundscapes to acoustemology and atmospheres (Abels 2022a; Abels and Eisenlohr 2025; Anderson 2009; Feld 2015; Riedel 2015; Riedel and Torvinen 2020; Zhang 2018). Anthropologically-informed sound studies highlight the post-colonial dimensions of sonic research (Maier 2016; Robinson 2020; Schwartz 2021; Wendt and Salim 2022) and critically consider the implicit 'whiteness of sound studies' (Stadler 2015; see also Stoever 2016) while sociologically-orientated sound studies are 'interested in the relationship between sound and the social production of meaning' (Kelman 2010: 215). Although the large breadth of sound studies makes its body of work increasingly challenging to navigate, several theories share the argument for shifting the focus of sonic perception from the ear to the entire body as a basic condition of living and knowing (see Abels 2022b; Graber and Sumera 2020; Howes 2019).

Nevertheless, the soundscape can be considered a point of origin through which the Canadian composer R. Murray Schafer (1993) seeks to highlight the human-induced change of sound and increased noise pollution as a detrimental characteristic of modernity. As a theoretical anchor for Schafer's intention to treat 'the world as a macrocosmic musical composition' (Schafer 1993: 5), soundscapes feature a broad range of characteristics that can manifest in

musical compositions, radio programmes or entire acoustic environments (Schafer 1993: 7). Schafer's reception mirrors the wide range of his scope, as contemporary music and sound art tend to practically apply the macrocosmic musical composition idea (Lacey 2017; see Solomos 2023), while academic sound studies tend to theoretically investigate the soundscape paradigm in acoustic environments (Ouzounian 2017). Soundscape, as 'the sonic environment' as well as 'any portion of the sonic environment regarded as a field for study' (Schafer 1993: 274), consists of 'events *heard* and not objects *seen*' (Schafer 1993: 8). This categorical separation of the senses has attracted criticism, most notably by Tim Ingold, who argues for an understanding of sound as neither fully reducible to mental capacities nor material features but as the experiential 'immersion in, and commingling with, the world in which we find ourselves' (Ingold 2007: 11, see also 2021:170). For Ingold, the verbalised idea of sound is another way to express one's ability to hear in the first place, making sound not an *object of* but a *condition for* hearing, or in other words, what humans hear *in* (see Ingold 2007: 11). Comparing sound to light helps Ingold to challenge the soundscape by arguing that the idea of a 'lightscape' bears similarly little substance, as when 'we look around on a fine day, we see a landscape bathed in sunlight, not a lightscape' (Ingold 2007: 11). Makis Solomos adds that the soundscape's modelling on the mode of visual perception constitutes its biggest drawback, as it 'assumes a global view' such as from a mountaintop that overslooks a landscape (Solomos 2023: 26). The sonic equivalent of this, however, is not a contemplative meta position but the opposite. To perceive the resounding layers of an environment, one must be located amid them, for example, by being 'immersed in the sonic whirlwind of a city' (Solomos 2023: 26). Ari Y. Kelman further argues that the ubiquitous use of the term 'soundscape' beyond the scope of academia and the arts has resulted in it referring 'to almost any experience of sound in almost any context' (Kelman 2010: 214). Despite this diluted reception, however, the original notion of soundscape does not represent 'a neutral field of aural investigation at all; rather, it is deeply informed by Schafer's own preferences for certain sounds over others' (Kelman 2010: 214). This subjectivity becomes especially apparent when Schafer admits that his work is ultimately 'about sounds that matter' which entails that in 'order to reveal them it may be necessary to rage against those which don't' (Schafer 1993: 12). Soundscapes therefore implicate a selective listening that differentiates between artificial sounds, associated with cacophony and noise, and preferred natural sounds. Schafer differentiates between 'hi-fi' soundscapes in forests and national parks and 'lo-fi' soundscapes according to what a modern city sounds like for him – noisy and oversaturated (see Schafer 1993: 43). The similarity between Schafer's categorical dismissal of urban sounds and Augé's rejection of non-places as anthropologically irrelevant (Augé 2008: 78) is worth noting here. Sophie Arkette (2004) argues in this context that Schafer's perspective is oversimplified, as typical urban sounds like a tram cannot equally be mirrored with 'agrarian sonic space' (Arkette 2004: 161–62) without erasing the city in the process. In her view, Schafer neglects the fact that cities 'cannot sound any other way' (Kelman 2010: 217),

entailing that people develop skills to sonically navigate and use them (see Steenson and Rodger 2015). In Schafer's theorisation of cities as lo-fi soundscapes, however, there is no space for such skills to develop as 'all signals have been reduced to noise' (Kelman 2010: 217). A location such as Mājro, which sonically sits between the city and the seascape, therefore cannot be grasped through Schafer's notion of soundscapes as it does not offer any tools for considering the sonic qualities of boundary phenomena. Nevertheless, Schafer has combined notions of sound and space in his study of acoustic ecology through 'the effects of the acoustic environment or SOUNDSCAPE [sic] on the physical responses or behavioural characteristics of creatures living within it' while paying attention to the 'imbalances which may have unhealthy or inimical effects' (Schafer 1993: 271). Within the reception of acoustic ecology, this 'imbalance', which supposes a universally agreed upon dichotomy between desired sounds and detrimental noise, has been criticised as lacking socio-cultural depth given its failure to 'recognise that diverse social and cultural groups – or even different individuals – experience sound and noise very differently' (Ouzounian 2017: 9). This aspect has, for example, caused challenges in the Marshallese diaspora in Arkansas, as the volume of church services has resulted in some cases in noise complaints from neighbours (Schwartz 2021: 177). For acoustic ecology's framing of noise pollution, this 'presumes that certain sounds – or even certain sound levels (as measured in decibels) – are acceptable while others are not and suggests a single, dominant model for distinguishing desired sounds from unwanted noise' (Ouzounian 2017: 9). Notwithstanding its many adoptions and theoretical renegotiations, soundscape remains a 'prescriptive text that is often referred to as a descriptive one' (Kelman 2010: 214) which results in the study of sound frequently adopting 'the term as shorthand, often for the more complex set of relationships that constitute the social life of sound' (Kelman 2010: 229).

One of the most prominent theoretical counterparts to the soundscape is acoustemology, most prominently associated with the work of Steven Feld, who combines epistemology with acoustics as a way of investigating sound and listening as a 'knowing-in-action: a knowing-with and knowing-through the audible' (Feld 2015: 12). Its use of relationality is rooted in Bruno Latour's actant theory (Latour 1996; see also Bennett 2010) and hypothesises that life is created from a wide range of practices that emanate from various sources, including non-human, non-living, organic and inorganic ones (Feld 2015: 15). As an explorative tool, acoustemology treats the creation of knowledge as a relational phenomenon that can be considered in line with John Dewey's theory on contextual and experiential knowing (Dewey and Bentley 1975). Built on existential relationality, acoustemology focuses on knowing through sound as based on the 'between-ness of experience' (Feld 2015: 13). It contends that knowledge is not an entity that exists a priori in a relational space until it is discovered by a discerning mind but rather that knowledge accrues over an extended period in a continuous process of participatory negotiation between subjects and the materiality of sound (Feld 2015: 13–14). Acoustemology

contrasts Schafer's soundscape as it neither subscribes to the idea of a sonic landscape nor replaces 'visualist ocularcentrism with sonocentrism as any sort of determining force of essentialist sensory master plans' (Feld 2015: 15). Following Henri Lefebvre's (1991, 2013, 2024) framework of sound and space as socially negotiated entities, Jonathan Sterne argues that the theoretical construct of soundscape 'indexes a set of sonic-spatial practices, the metadiscourses that describe them, and the cultural and sensory conditions that make it possible to – even passively – experience sonic space in certain terms' (Sterne 2013: 183–84). Sound studies are characterised by intersectional perspectives on listening as a central quality of human life (Erlmann 2004). That many of these considerations foreground white, Anglo- and Eurocentric and settler-colonial actors is problematised by Dylan Robinson (2020), who develops a 'hungry listening' to challenge the colonial 'tin ear' (Robinson 2020: 37) that strategically has excluded indigenous sounds from public recognition. Robinson sets out to 'develop strategies for different transformative politics of listening that are resurgent in their exploration of Indigenous epistemologies, foundations, languages, and sensory logics; or, ones that are decolonial in their ability to move us beyond settler listening fixations' (Robinson 2020: 38). Listening in a decolonial context appears not as an ontological condition but within a contested and stratified 'intersectional process' (Robinson 2020: 39) that continuously shifts 'the places, models, and structures of how we listen' (Robinson 2020: 72). Technological development has been an essential contributor to shaping this intersectional process, which has prompted Kate Lacey to argue that the massification of recording, listening and amplification devices has resulted in a 're-sounding of the public sphere', with 'new dimensions of embodiedness, affect, intersubjectivity and plurality' (Lacey 2013: 199). For Lacey, these developments raise essential questions about how agency, structure, cosmopolitanism and democracy are negotiated in the public sphere. While studies address the relationship between sound and spatial use in urban environments (Born 2013; O'Connor et al. 2025), the sonic effects of liminality on everyday life in the Anthropocene remain understudied. Nevertheless, the engagement with James J. Gibson's (2015) notion of affordances in relation to sound (Steenson and Rodger 2015) and urban space (Stevens et al. 2024) creates an opportunity for addressing this gap.

1.3 Spatial Affordances and Sounds as Materials

A post under the headline, 'Is there such a thing as liminal sounds?' on the r/LiminalSpace forum on Reddit:

> Do you believe there are specific sounds that effectively capture the feeling of being in a liminal space? I find it intriguing how certain sounds can evoke a similar sense of in-betweenness and ambiguity. Please share your experiences and any sound suggestions you may have!
>
> (VxMX 2023)

There are various answers, listing sounds like the buzz of fluorescent lights, freezers and aircons, chirping cicadas, dripping water, waves crashing on a beach, airplane sounds, cars rolling over gavel, wind flowing through a quiet house and even music such as vaporwave and Brian Eno's Music for Installations. User 'manwhowalked1kmiles' answers:

> Have you ever noticed the way the sounds outside change at night or before a thunderstorm rolls in? This, especially with the sounds of semi trucks rolling by on a motorway/an Interstate highway/the world-famous Autobahn a few miles away
>
> (VxMX 2023).

Numerous of these broad sonic associations with liminality can be heard daily in Mājro, while others are idiosyncratic to the atoll and seascape. One of them is *rukruk*, the sound of a coconut which has fallen from a tree bouncing over the ground. Similar is also the sound of a breadfruit falling from a tree, resulting not in a bouncing sound but more of a strong thud comparable to a rugby ball hitting the ground from a great height. The liminality of these sounds becomes most evident as they are constantly intersected with *lijeñūrñūr*, the sound of waves pounding on reef (Marshallese-English Online Dictionary (MOD) 2022). Returning to the question of how liminality endows islands with powers and affordances (Pugh and Chandler 2021: 191), it is my understanding that an answer can be won once Mājro is explored through the inherent invitations in its layout that people follow, ignore or subvert in their daily use of the atoll, lagoon and ocean space. These invitations have been conceptualised by the psychologist James J. Gibson, who coined the neologism 'affordance' to argue that humans principally attend to the intended use of objects rather than their abstract shapes, colours and orientations (see Costall 1995: 470). The affordance of an object is what it invites the user to do with it, for example, 'an elongated elastic object, such as a *fiber, thread, thong,* or *rope,* affords knotting, binding, lashing, knitting, and weaving (Figure 1.3). These are kinds of behaviour where manipulation leads to manufacture' (Gibson 2015: 125 original italicisation).

Despite its useful scope for analysing material interaction (Dant 2008) in everyday life, Gibson's initial concept fails to grasp how affordances are changed, transmitted, rejected and re-developed in social contexts. This problem has been addressed by Katherine Loveland (1991), who frames the prioritisation of affordances according to cultural stimuli and traditions in social groups. This re-evaluation of affordances is shaped through creativity that transgresses the culturally determined preferences for sanctioned or even canonised affordances (Loveland 1991: 101; Costall 1997). Arjun Appadurai further differentiates two contexts of re-evaluation, as the macroscopical social history of things should not be viewed separately from their microscopical cultural biography, 'for it is the social history of things, over large periods of time and at large social levels, that constrains the form, meaning, and structure

Figure 1.3 New mats woven at tabon te keekee lodge in tarawa, Kiribati.

of more short-term, specific, and intimate trajectories' (Appadurai 1986: 36). Small alterations in cultural biographies nonetheless hold the power to initiate a shift in social history (Appadurai 1986: 36). Igor Kopytoff confirms that social biographies of objects highlight otherwise obscure adoptions of technologies and ideas, highlighting that it is not the circumstances under which affordances 'are adopted, but the way they are culturally redefined and put to use' (Kopytoff 1986: 67).

While Gibson's theory has been widely applied in technology (Gaver 1991; Hutchby 2001, 2003; Rappert 2003) and commodity studies (Kopytoff 1986), its reception in urban and sound studies is comparatively limited. Stevens et al. (2024) note that grasping the creative adoption of affordances in urban space is only achievable once they are submitted to a horizontal expansion through relational assemblage and actor network theory (Deleuze 1990; Deleuze and Guattari 2007; Latour 1987, 1996, 2023). Considering that cities offer multi-sensorial experiences, Gibson's exclusive framing of affordances

through visual stimuli brackets out too many essential sensory qualities like 'the smell of coffee or diesel fuel' or 'the temperature of surfaces, the movement of air or the sound of traffic' (Stevens et al. 2024fi: 96; see also Arkette 2004). Affordances are also conditioned by the unspecified functions of urban space and the possibilities for appropriation that lie therein (Stevens et al. 2024fi: 96). Assemblage theory (DeLanda 2019; Deleuze 1990; Deleuze and Guattari 2007) highlights here that cities are assemblages of interconnected flows of 'material things and people as well as its non-material uses, meanings, and regimes of control' (Stevens et al. 2024: 97; see also Dovey 2010). Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's (1994) notion of desiring machines, assemblage theory treats desire as life's primary driving force that finds its expression in urban design through a longing 'for profit, status, speed, or a seat with a good view' (Stevens et al. 2024: 97). Desire is interlaced with the agency of the material environment (see Bennett 2010), creating a nexus of social, spatial, material and cultural characteristics that structure everyday life. A flight of stairs, for example, represents not only a liminal object designed for ascent and descent but an assemblage of relationships between its materiality and the entities that interact with its affordances through flows of desire, appropriating it as a seat, picnic area or skate obstacle in the process (Giamarino, O'Connor, and Willing 2023).

Besides assemblage theory, Stevens et al. draw on Bruno Latour's (1987, 1996, 2023) actor-network theory (ANT) to further solidify their horizontal framing of affordances beyond the ontological nature-culture divide. Like assemblages, ANT prioritises flat and relational relationships over hierarchical ontologies (see Farías 2011) and frames affordances in space and objects as prescriptions that are interpreted, followed and overthrown by users (see Akrich 1992). Stevens et al. distinguish between 'intended and unintended affordances' while emphasising that not only the intentions of designers matter but also those of users (Stevens et al. 2024: 98). A parking lot, for example, exceeds the mere intentions of its designers by embodying the socio-material negotiations of actors and meaning in the assemblage of public space beyond the parking of cars. This can take shape in the form of different playful uses of the car park through skateboarding or even hosting events such as concerts or unsanctioned rallies and protests. The socio-material negotiations of urban space can be organised according to formal and informal as well as intended and unintended engagement. The result is four categories of affordances that characterise the interplay between urban design and the use of public space: *Enabling affordances* are formally designed to support the desire of its users. Design and use overlap without friction, for example in the case of a playground slide that users glide down on. *Constraining affordances* are formally created to limit users' desires, combining intended design with unintended use, for example, by surrounding the playground with a gated fence open only during limited daytime hours. *Improvised affordances* are based on adaptation and created informally through a mix of unintended design and intended use, for example, by walking up a playground slide instead of sliding down on it.

Serendipitous affordances are informal and discovered by chance. They merge unintentional design with unintended use (Stevens et al. 2024f: 99); for example, after a child lost its toy car while playing on a slide only to discover that it can be used as a ramp to let the car perform stunts. This categorisation of affordances necessitates an extension of urban design 'beyond the narrow focus on functionalism to embrace a multiplicity of perceptions and relationships beyond the conscious intentions of designers and users' (Stevens et al. 2024: 100). Facilitating and prohibiting affordances render, in their perspective, cities habitable and safe, while impromptu and serendipitous affordances make them urban (Stevens et al. 2024: 100).

Stevens et al. discuss several examples without analysing the affordances of their liminal features. I argue that two of them, however, can be made sense of as liminal spaces. The stairs in front of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City create a passage leading up to the building which is placed on a pedestal above the street. Visitors to the museum must ascend the stairs to enter the spatially and symbolically exalted halls of culture. A common appropriation uses the stairs' improvised affordances when people sit on them and do various things such as resting, socialising or picnicking. If there is a large enough crowd occupying the steps in such a way, their serendipitous affordances can be appropriated through sound, for example, when street performers on the sidewalk below treat them as a stadium stand for music and theatre performances (Stevens et al. 2024: 100). Through these dynamics, a core feature of urban design primarily intended as a liminal passageway between the sidewalk and the museum is turned into a temporary place of sojourn. The second example is Khaju Bridge in the city of Isfahan. The two-storey construction serves both as a bridge on the upper level and as a weir on the lower section, featuring sluice gates at regular intervals. The lower level's structure creates unique acoustics and offers a space hidden from the 'authoritarian public gaze' (Stevens et al. 2024: 100). As the space is nonetheless publicly accessible, musicians and other artists intentionally use sounds 'to appropriate the otherwise functional space as a source of wellbeing for its users' (Çakmak and Khaleghimoghaddam 2016: 72). Again, an architectural feature designed as a liminal space in the sense that its function is supposed to facilitate the pass through of water on the lower level and of foot traffic on the upper level is appropriated through sound, using its improvised and serendipitous affordances to create places of wellbeing. These examples of the appropriation of liminal spaces through sound nevertheless highlight that affordances should also apply to sonic characteristics – in short, for figuring out the relationship between liminal spaces, the sounds they produce and the sounds that are brought to them to temporarily make them not liminal requires an understanding of auditory affordances.

Christopher Steenson and Matthew Rodger seek to conceptualise the latter by exploring 'not only how we obtain information about the auditory environment but also, most pertinently, how we can also act with the environment' (Steenson and Rodger 2015: 175). Their approach seeks not a merely

passive but reciprocal understanding between perceiving and using the relationships between sound and materiality. It champions an understanding of 'sounds as materials' with the aim to include auditory affordances in the scope of everyday life (Steenson and Rodger 2015: 178). How agents use sounds for tasks like 'auditory wayfinding' (Steenson and Rodger 2015: 178) is then comparable to how materials are used for construction and manufacture. Ingold's description of the weaverbird building a nest serves here as an example, the bird 'choosing materials that afford use in the immanency of the task of building' (Steenson and Rodger 2015: 178; see Ingold 2002). The nest is created according to the use of its material constituents, not as the result of a metaphysical notion of an ideal nest that the bird seeks to reproduce as accurately as possible. The authors transfer Ingold's description to argue that the 'affordances we detect from sound are immanent to our relevant use of them' (Steenson and Rodger 2015: 178). While navigating urban space, sounds like the ones produced by traffic create in situ affordances for navigation, comparable to how specific affordances of grass and leaves emerge for the bird in search of material for building a nest. Using the term 'material' to describe the affordances of sound circumvents 'the talk of things like "objects" or representations of some kind that convey a detached, objectified view of how sounds come "ready-made" with meaning or functionalities' (Steenson and Rodger 2015: 178). The sound of a car approaching from behind, for example, indicates for many people an incoming danger that results in evasion. For visually impaired people, however, the same sound might not primarily afford a danger ought to be avoided but a sonic boundary element forming an integral element for sonically mapping out space (see Koutsoklenis and Papadopoulos 2011). What is more, framing sounds as materials also creates the opportunity to include auditory affordances in the framework of improvised and serendipitous affordances (Dant 2008; Loveland 1991; Stevens et al. 2024). Doing so then allows to explore the relationship between the use of sound in spaces with enabling and constraining affordances that render them liminal, such as roads, driveways and parking lots. In the following chapters, I will use the term 'sono-material' to highlight this relationship between sounds as materials and the affordances of the atoll space and its cityscape. Understanding sound in a material sense resonates with the Marshallese notion of *ainikien*, the word commonly translated to English as 'voice' and 'sound'. It conveys a combination of two meanings based on the roots *aini* 'to gather' which is connected to *ae*, a term that can either mean 'to gather' or 'current' as in ocean current. The word *kien* can be translated as 'government, law, commandment, ordinance, politics, rule, regulations, policy' (Marshallese-English Online Dictionary (MOD) 2022; see Schwartz 2021: 36). Whether *ainikien* is interpreted as 'gathering rules' or the 'rules of the currents', it indicates an understanding and use of sound that is embedded in the material currents of Marshallese life instead of standing as an external ontological object outside of them. *Ainikien* structures the navigation of liminal atoll spaces like *etal iene* through a bodily engagement with the material conditions of the reef, the ocean and the

lagoon. People who practice *etal iene* use their *roñjake*, they are listening for *ainikien* in specific material contexts, for example, as *ṃūṃūṇṃūṇ*, the sound of treading feet as they walk across the uneven coral, or as *lijeñūrñūr*, the sound of waves pounding on the reef, to gauge when the time is right to cross the liminal space between islands. I share Steenson & Rodger's notion that intentional use forms the basis for the engagement with *ainikien*. In the case of *etal iene*, as it occurs between the communities on the island of Ājej (Ejit) and in Jarōj (Darrit, Rita), it is the motivation of community connection and running errands that structure the appropriation of the liminal space between the islands, be it through *etal iene* or by catching the ferry between the islands. The following chapter will add another layer to this relationship between sounds as materials and their use by the communities in Mājro. Specifically, it traces how sounds as materials create improvised and serendipitous affordances of liminal spaces that are appropriated to create *ṃōṇōṇōū* – happiness.

Note

1 To illustrate from the point of other languages that I study and use: German, my first language, has directly adopted liminality as 'Liminalität' while other words originating from and used more frequently than Liminalität are for example Schwellenbereich – transitional area, Schwellenzustand – transitional state and Schwellenraum – transitional space. Japanese, my third language, has also adopted liminality directly from English as リミナリティ – liminality, while other terms like 若潮 – waka shio (young tide), for example, describe the transitional tide between spring and neap tides.

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2 ṃōṇōṇōū

Ludic Appropriation and the Sonic Cocoon

'This is not a playground!' – an utterance that children around the world are familiar with when being caught playing in unsanctioned spaces. Signs cautioning: 'no ball sports allowed', 'no skating' and 'no loitering' are similarly universal, emphasising that play is not safe in this location, or that it is perceived as too noisy and destructive (see Bourke 2014; Glenney, Boutin, and O'Connor 2023; McDuie-Ra 2025). These warnings exclude by commanding that one's enjoyment should be conducted somewhere else, similar to how rough sleepers are recurrently expelled from dwelling in public spaces with the omnipresent police mantra: 'move on!' (Cooper 2021: 97). It appears that playing in unsanctioned locations has subversive potential; it carries an air of unwanted autonomy, and indeed, Quentin Stevens notes that what 'appears to be play is by no means universal, nor is it always free and benign. Play is contingent and exists among the tensions and contradictions of urban social life' (Stevens 2007: 2). Amenity, the opaque ideological driver of urban design, equates everyday life with capitalism's expectation of ceaseless productivity and condemns play as 'an occasion of pure waste: waste of time, energy, ingenuity, skill, and often of money' (Caillois 2001: 5–6; see Stevens 2007: 2). This definition proposed by Roger Caillois resonates with Johan Huizinga's seminal characterisation of play as a 'free activity', making ingenious use of calculated yet absorbing silliness (see Huizinga 1980: 13). The foundation for its anti-productive framing is rooted in Huizinga's claim that play pursues 'no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it' (Huizinga 1980: 13). Although this perspective has spawned much scholarship, it appears rather out of date among the present professionalisation of leisure under the vocational label of 'influencer' as well as billion-dollar sports and e-sports ind ustries (see Clement 2025). Key characteristics of play are nonetheless that it happens voluntarily and has the power to shape social bonds and drastically alter the sensation of time and space (Huizinga 1980: 13; Caillois 2001: 6). Although players know that a complete escape from the confinements of everyday life is impossible, the illusion of escape helps to 'test and transgress' (Stevens 2007: 29) its boundaries by encountering difference simultaneously with new dynamics of sociality. Although urban design agendas frequently claim to serve a wide range of users through idealised notions of function, the wellbeing of

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one group can incriminate another's comfort. Whatever urban design deems functionally correct during a planning process rarely covers all the resulting day-to-day practices in the eventual space. Indeed, users frequently adapt their use to contingent material, social and economic dependencies and needs (see Section 1.3 in Chapter 1). Play, therefore, holds the power to foreground the constructed nature of urban functionality through uses 'which are not practical and other than what the spaces were designed for' (Stevens 2007: 26). In line with this transgressive potential, Duncan McDuie-Ra develops insurgent play as 'a concept for identifying and analysing lively bodily expressions enmeshed in the constant making, unmaking and remaking of the city' (McDuie-Ra 2025: 5). Insurgent play has the potential to intervene in the dominant forms of making and using cities through bodily expressions. This shifts the focus of counterpolitics to locations in the city that frequently are overlooked or ignored by policy and majority use. Insurgent play territorialises sections of the city 'intended for other uses or that have fallen out of use entirely' while 'generating social worlds, communities and identities' (McDuie-Ra 2025: 6). This characteristic renders insurgent play a bottom-up phenomenon that perseveres even among the development or multiplication of sanctioned spaces for play.

In line with these subversive and reformative qualities of play, in this chapter, I will argue that ludic forms of appropriating liminal spaces in Mājro function as sources of *ṃōṇōṇōū*, joy and happiness. The chapter is divided into three parts: the first section traces *ṃōṇōṇōū* through notions of wellbeing, in particular subjective wellbeing (SWB) in relation to sport and wellbeing as it has been explored in indigenous studies. In it, I argue that *ṃōṇōṇōū* becomes identifiable through *ainikien*. The second section conceptualises ludic appropriation and explores how sounds reshape Mājro*'s* spatial affordances by creating what I call sonic cocoons. I frame sonic cocoons as communal sono-material methods for temporarily turning liminal space into *jikin kwelọk*, places of social assembly, sojourn and communal wellbeing by using different forms of *ainikien*. I distinguish sonic cocoons from Michael Bull's notion of the auditory bubble created through personal stereos and headphones (see Bull 2006). Both ludic appropriation and the sonic cocoon challenge wellbeing as a stagnant state of being. Rather, they align wellbeing with the Oceanic understanding of circular time as a continuous *wellbecoming*, that is, a recurring metamorphosis that works through phases of certainty and liminal uncertainty (see Diaz 2018; Thomassen 2016). Based on my engagement with Steenson and Rodger's (2015) treatment of sounds as materials (see Section 1.3 in Chapter 1), I highlight in the third section the sono-material qualities of *ainikien*. I contextualise *ainikien* with Birgit Abels' sound knowledge and Brandon LaBelle's notion of vibratory labour (Abels 2018a, 2022b; LaBelle 2010). LaBelle associates the latter with a drummer, who, by beating the skins of drums, lives out 'in amplified fashion the fundamental acts of personalised time and related spacing' (LaBelle 2010: 139). The resulting vibration equally extends into the felt-body and the surrounding space, creating a field of energy 'cutting through the body, moving up from the arms and through the shoulders, down the spine and into the

pelvic area, as sensations that also fill space with their driving movements, as sound pressures against other skins' (LaBelle 2010: 139). Knowing and creating space through sound not only aligns with what Birgit Abels calls 'a performative mode of knowledge deriving its efficacy from the experiential impact of its own unfolding in sound' (Abels 2018a: 24), it also suggests that vibratory labour extends beyond the drum set. By beating the leathery, rubbery skins of volleyballs and basketballs, by clapping rhythms, by sending *ainikien* through vibrations of their *bōro*[1] (throat) into space, people in Mājro perform salubrious vibratory labour (see Schwartz 2021: 30). This vibratory labour is the ludic appropriation of liminality, an occupance that turns abstract and liminal spaces into *jikin kweḷọk*, places of social assembly. Specifically, ludic appropriation merges the affordances of liminal space with the application of sound knowledge through vibratory labour. To visualise this dynamic relationship between spatial affordances, wellbeing as *ṃōṇōṇōū* and liminality as the uncanny valley in between (see Diel and Lewis 2022), I develop the sono-material affordance circuit (SMAC), which I will use to analyse the case studies in Chapters 3 and 4.

2.1 Sound and Wellbeing

The question of what wellbeing is and how it can be achieved is likely as old as human thought. Health, often defined negatively through the absence of ailment (Wheaton et al. 2020:5), is a less contested term than wellbeing, which, due to its subjective nature, often escapes the theoretical grasp. Wellbeing is dependent on factors that range from personal, such as enough sleep, to micro-interpersonal and macro-societal like, for example, the availability of recreational space or sanitary facilities (see Liamputtong 2012; Testoni, Mansfield, and Dolan 2018; Wheaton et al. 2020). Subjective wellbeing (SWB) has emerged out of a vast nexus of scholarship as a prominent conceptual framework for measuring the individual experience of wellbeing in relation to aspects like perceived comfort, safety and happiness. Ed Diener (1984) groups concepts of SWB in three categories: first, defined through external criteria like virtue or holiness, rendering SWB not a subjective state but socially sanctioned and desirable qualities with a normative force. Second, through a focus on 'life satisfaction' (see Maddux 2025; Sirgy 2012; Vassar 2012) interrogating how people perceive their lives in a positive light. Third, in relation to its quotidian use in everyday language, that is, as a majority of positive emotional experiences over negative ones (Bradburn 1969; see also Ryff and Keyes 1995). Testoni et al. (2018) highlight the conceptual benefits of SWB in sport and policymaking, which offers several useful insights for the exploration of *ṃōṇōṇōū* through ludic appropriation. Their point of contention is that policy should 'focus on how sport makes people feel, rather than on what experts or people themselves think the benefits of sport amount to' (Testoni et al. 2018: 816). Aligned with the third understanding of SWB as identified by Diener, Testoni et al. treat the values of SWB as 'solely determined on the grounds of how people feel: that is, any outcome has value only insofar as it makes people

feel well' (Testoni et al. 2018: 817). From this perspective, SWB is the best-suited concept for encapsulating the relationship between sport and wellbeing, as it does not function on the assumption of underlying pre-defined preferences and therefore 'retains the democratic aspect of letting people decide what is good for them, in the wake of preference satisfaction' (Testoni et al. 2018: 818). Assessing SWB focuses on outcomes that are perceived as positive by practitioners rather than the cognitive states and judgements that precede these outcomes. Since self-perception forms SWB, it is irrelevant whether people are incoherent in their self-assessment (Testoni et al. 2018: 818).

Critics (see Adler 2012; Bernheim 2009) point at the scientific drawbacks of SWB's highly subjective analytical approach, which most frequently is measured in surveys after the fact containing arbitrary number scales (Testoni et al. 2018: 818). I argue here for a different approach to evaluating SWB, which, in the case of Mājro, draws on *ainikien* produced during play as a strong indicator for *m̧ōn̄ōn̄ōū* as a form of SWB, for example, expressed through *roro* (chants) (see Schwartz 2021: 178), cheers and laughter. This approach highlights that both the production and perception of sound is 'always one step ahead of the reflective language that seeks to capture its meaningfulness' (Abels 2018a: 24, see also 2018b: 12). Practitioners reporting on ludic appropriation therefore only provide a partial account of how sound is contributing to SWB. That the sounds of specific environments are nevertheless mentioned as key contributors to wellbeing is important to highlight. Bennett et al.'s (2014) study on the wellness of veterans who suffer from PTSD is noteworthy, as a sound source of wellbeing is frequently located in blue spaces near water. In this example, the sounds of a close-by creek facilitated a peaceful setting for a participant of a fishing trip who immediately noticed the benefits of the sonic environment for his sleep hygiene:

> that creek- that took me to bed every night and I slept the last two nights the best I've slept in a long time and I didn't even have to use medicine. That's freakin amazing. Usually I'm up all night and as soon as I got in the sleeping bag (snap). Listening to the surroundings and the creek and just everything. I was in my own little world and it was peaceful
> (Bennett et al. 2014:176).

Peaceful worlding through sound also resonates with an account by Mājro local Jack Niedenthal, who has been living in the Marshall Islands since 1981. He noted a comparable effect on his sleep while living on non-urban atolls such as Nam̧o (Namu), where

> pretty much all you're hearing is the wind and the waves and it's, and after a while, when I would sleep, it was like I was dead. I've never slept better in my entire life, and I never will. I mean, and I'm sleeping on a cement floor […] not on a bed. And I used to sleep; I had trouble waking up in the morning. I was asleep and I could have sleep, like I

> said, culture shock. I was like, going to sleep at 8:00 and I'd sleep for 12 hours. And it was like… like, you're dead. And it was wonderful, and I've never slept like that before
>
> (Jack Niedenthal 2024, personal communication).

Sound was also a key contributing factor for his decision to build his house about 30 kilometres from Mājro's business district:

> I lived on outer islands for so long, and I've been here for a little while, and I just – I couldn't, but it really came down to sound. It's just like I couldn't stand [it]; it felt like a city environment everywhere I lived. It's all kinds of noise all the time. So, I went all the way out there, […] found this nice piece of land, leased it, and then built my house away from the road. And you go out there and it's crickets. Lots of crickets. So, yeah, I mean, sound was still important to me when it came to the selection of my house. Maybe subconsciously. Yeah, but I knew that it just, I didn't like living around all these people all the time
>
> (Jack Niedenthal 2024, personal communication).

Indeed, the sound of crickets is special for Niedenthal, who worked for over thirty years as the Trust Liaison for the displaced people of Pikinni Atoll. An avid filmmaker, he has also created numerous feature films that make avid use of Marshallese music and portray Marshallese tales and everyday life. One name stands out in the list of films Niedenthal has created: *Ainikien Jidjid ilo Boñ* – The Sound of Crickets at Night (Microwave Films n.d.). The idea for the film is based on an encounter that dates to the late 1980s when Niedenthal travelled with a group of elders to *Pikinni* to redraw and record the *wato*, the boundary lines and ownership of the land, as the community had not set foot on their lands for about forty years. Most revered was the night-time, when the elders told stories about how life on Pikinni was before the Japanese occupation, the war and the nuclear bomb tests:

> One night I was out there with an old man, Laurie Casey, who was one of my favorite people of all time. I said to him, like: "What do you miss most about Bikini? […] You know, you're back here now, you haven't been here in 40 years. Long time, what did you miss most about this place?" We sat there, he didn't answer. He was very contemplative. He wrote the anthem. He's a marvelous poet. […] He authored a lot of songs without pencil and paper, was all stuck in his head. And he sat there, and he thought for a moment and then, and you have to understand, […] you're out in the edge of the jungle and there's billions of crickets and it's loud. It's so loud. I mean, after a while you're there, you stop noticing it. But when there was this big, long pause and it was very loud and I was actually thinking: "wow, this sound is… wow." […] And then he elaborated, he talked about a whole bunch of other stuff, but he

> started out with the sound of the crickets because that's what it was like, it was overwhelming where we were sitting. So, I thought: "wow, that's a pretty neat thing".

Providing an answer through *roñjake* (listening) demonstrates the profound connection of the Pikkinnians to their home which is also emphasised in the aftermath of the nuclear bomb tests as Niedenthal remembers hearing a story that

> when the bombs went off and the ash started to snow all over the islands [...] it was very quiet because a lot of the life there died very quickly with the insect life and things like that. So, not that I ever heard that there was no sound of crickets after that bomb blast, but I kind of put those two together to make a story out of it. And so, that sound, that part of it was really important to me
>
> (Jack Niedenthal 2024, personal communication).

Ronald Jorthan, an artist and social media strategist based in Mājro who studied communication at the University of Hawai'i at Hilo also gives an account on SWB in relation to the sound of water as he talks about the calming effect of a waterfall as a place

> where you can just, you know, just jump in and feel like your whole problem[s] just fade away. 'Cause the waterfall is… always keeps me at ease, where I just don't have to… think too much because it always helps me a lot when I'm, like, not being that stressful at schoolwork. 'Cause I have to, like, go outside, listen to the waterfall and just be at ease and all that. I even like sketch sometimes, 'cause it's how I usually do, it's like a therapy [laughs]. Well, my waterfall is my therapist [laughs].

Jorthan also describes a haunting characteristic of the wind's sound in Hawai'i which he depicts as 'singing at night' akin to 'the ghost of the wind can, you know, project a different kind of tune sound outside'. To his ears, Hawai'ian rain has similar qualities as it sounds like a 'screaming audience' whereas Mājro's rain is more subdued and 'quiet':

> When you're like at the road, it's way different when you're in Hawaii. That's why I like, I got mesmerized with every different sounds [sic] I'm hearing and it was enjoyable for me. Because I was like: "man, I feel like I want to keep on living here!" [...] It really relaxes me, though, like all my, depression, anxiety just gone. Just listen to that make a soothing sound
>
> (Ronald Jorthan 2024, personal communication).

Jorthan's most favoured soothing sound in Hawai'i is the 'whistling' of the local frogs. It creates a noteworthy connection to his time in school at

Marshall Islands High School, as Jorthan remembers that 'we used to hear geckos outside […] so, that's where the school was represented by geckos, that's why'. Later, while his brother was the captain of the school's basketball team, also called the geckos, the school approached Jorthan to draw a gecko design for the team's crest. The sound of geckos on the school grounds has waned over the years, in Jorthan's view 'because some of the geckos probably like just moved someplace else'. There is a notable frustration with his perception of Mājro's sonic environment as it does not offer any kind of soothing sounds to him:

> No, I don't think there are any other sounds that make me feel at ease. Like there is always the same sound over and over. And it's like… it's like you're listening to […] old CDs, that's how I'm feeling about it. Like, even the whole island looks like a CD [laughs]
>
> (Ronald Jorthan 2024, personal communication).

The flatness of the atoll, illustrated through Jorthan's CD metaphor, exemplifies specific sonic patterns that intensify and fade with the tides and in more recent time, especially increasing erosion on the atoll's coastlines. Kitlang Kabua, who served as an Ebeye project representative in the Pacific Resilience Project II, mentions in the documentary film One Word that the effects of erosion near her oceanside house have changed her perception of *lijeñūrñūr*, the sound of waves hitting the reef. While enjoying it growing up as a child, she now finds it

> very scary. And late at night, when you feel the strong winds and high waves, strong waves, you feel it much closer. You feel the vibrations of the power, of the strength of these waves just, you know, that force just… not physically hitting your house, but the sound of it – it's much closer to your own home and it's a very scary thought especially when you have children around you
>
> (Uriona and Uriona 2020:18:31 – 19:04).

Indeed, the atoll's vibratory labour of *lijeñūrñūr* intensifies especially during king tides that can inundate entire sections of the atoll. Figure 2.1 depicts a still from a video recorded in the neighbourhood of Rairōk, showing the lagoon during an afternoon high tide. Underneath the waves crashing into the sea wall is a small beach accessible through stairs during low tide, now completely submerged under approximately three meters of water. Experiencing the strength of these waves was multi-sensorial, as I had my body pressed against the seawall while holding the tripod, so that the strong wind did not blow it over. I constantly felt the vibration of the water hitting the sea wall.

While the sounds of blue spaces are frequently associated with SWB, it is necessary to acknowledge the detrimental and destructive forces of water. For assessing people's relationships with the liminal aspects of overlapping blue,

Figure 2.1 Waves hitting the sea wall during high tide in Rairōk, Mājro.

grey and green spaces, this requires a flexible perspective beyond the assumption that certain spaces have per se effects on people. Several studies point at this complexity, however usually in relation to 'blue space interventions' (Britton et al. 2020:50) such as surfing or kayaking (Tardona 2011). Panelli and Tipa contrast this with a study on Māori wellbeing in Aotearoa which highlights the relationship between place and culturally specific conditions. The complexity of sociality, value systems, connection to place and cultural identity in Māori's experience of wellbeing indicates that there cannot be a 'unified Maori perspective (or critique of Maori experiences) and many complexities and contradictions exist for different Maori peoples' (Panelli and Tipa 2007: 449). These lived contradictions include not only necessary 'interactions with a non-Maori world that is based primarily on capitalist Western values' but also the negotiation of Māori life in primarily 'urban settings with varying types of interaction with traditional tribal activities' (Panelli and Tipa 2007: 449). This description resonates with the complex and often contradictory responsibilities that Marshallese must negotiate to conduct their daily lives. The impact of colonialism and resulting alienation from their own lands and waters is a common connecting factor that numerous indigenous nations across Oceania share (Barker 2013; Panelli and Tipa 2007). Barbara Rose Johnston and Holly M. Barker point out in a study on the displacement of the people of Roñļap (Rongelap) that the loss of 'land affects diet, health, and household economy and severely inhibits the Rongelapese ability to produce or reproduce cultural knowledge about the local environment—knowledge

that is essential to the survival and long-term well-being of the community' (Johnston and Barker 2008: 167). Scholarship on wellbeing in the Marshall Islands has been focused on events and special occasions such as Kūrijṃōj, the Christmas period during which celebrations such as *jebta* are being held (see Chapter 4.1). The connection between wellbeing and displacement is often addressed in these festivities. The people of Āne-wātak (Enewetak) atoll, for example, who were exiled to the uninhabited and resource-poor Wūjlañ (Ujelang) atoll during US nuclear bomb testing, express their longing and connection to their home during Kūrijṃōj: 'for many of those who lived most of their lives on Wūjlañ, the return to a bountiful life on Āne-wetak represents the fulfilment of the pleas for well-being that are made at Kūrijmōj' (Carucci 1997: 177). Upon returning to Āne-wātak after radiological cleanup had concluded in 1980, 'the meaning of "well-being" changed as people moved from their state of relative impoverishment on Wūjlañ to their current state of relative wealth on Āne-wetak' (Carucci 1997: 182). Keemem, first-year birthdays, are also elementary occasions during which a child is welcomed to the community through gifts, songs, dances and speeches (Hess 2004; Johnston and Barker 2008: 70). There is, nevertheless, a lack in scholarship on wellbeing in relation to *ṃōṇōṇōū* outside of the festive seasons. While I also highlight the use of *ainikien* for appropriating liminal space in two examples of Kūrijmōj, I will contextualise these with non-festive examples from everyday life. In the following section, I seek to encapsulate the dynamics and practices that are mixed with *ainikien* and ṃōṇōṇōū through the metaphor of the sonic cocoon.

2.2 Putting Sound into Ludic Use

Academic explorations of ludic forms of adaptation have largely been limited to the study of texts. Julie Sanders (2016), for example, analyses adoption and appropriation phenomena in literature, theatre and film. She notes that adaptation can be understood as 'a transpositional practice, casting a specific genre into another generic mode, an act of re-vision in itself'(Sanders 2016: 22). While focused on textual analysis, Sanders acknowledges that adaptation has been limited in Western culture to one-dimensional concepts of creativity and genius (Sanders 2016: 33). Nonetheless, digitisation and globalised cultural circulation have led to adaptation and appropriation phenomena functioning through a 'complex filtration' in 'networks, webs and signifying fields, rather than simplistic one-way lines of movement from source to adaptation' (Sanders 2016: 33). Purnomo et al. (2021) suggest that 'ludic adaptation' is realised by adjusting texts for children according to parameters of babyfication, chibification, bambification, and cherubification (Purnomo et al. 2021:95). The aspect of the ludic is in this context taken from Roger Caillois (2001), who defines 'ludus' as structured play, which he contrasts with paidia, spontaneous play. Appropriation, in contrast to adoption, is 'a more decisive journey away from the informing text into a wholly new cultural product and domain,

often through the actions of interpolation and critique as much as through the movement from one genre to others' (Sanders 2016: 35). This understanding of appropriation is valuable when considering auditory affordances and public space, as it holds the opportunity for grasping the creative transformation process according to different sensual cues and needs by users. Ludic forms of appropriating public space in a multi-sensorial manner are explored in the Republic of Chile by Manuela Badilla Rajevic (2019) in a study on urban interventions through photo murals and impromptu carnivals that raise awareness on victims of the military dictatorship and the history of public resistance. Contrasting the sanctioned forms of remembering in memorial sites and museums, young Chileans born after the end of the Pinochet era foster cultural memory through intentionally ephemeral yet recurring unsanctioned appropriation of Chile's starkly privatised urban space. Photo collages and carnival celebrations that sonically emphasise the names of the regime's victims utilise the strength of ludic practice in generating and occupying its own time and space which proves to be an effective tool for pausing ordinary life (Badilla Rajevic 2019: 734; Huizinga 1980: 13). Badilla Rajevic emphasises that the street not only functions as a canvas for creative expression but the participatory politics of demanding recognition (Badilla Rajevic 2019: 741). The reconfiguration of affordances from liminality to hosting assemblages of grassroots memory through activist art and the vibratory labour of carnival celebrations holds the potential of widening access to the participation in cultural memory. How can this temporary but nevertheless impactful restructuring of urban space be conceptualised through vibratory labour?

As a metaphor for social sphere and individual focus of interest, bubbles have become a constituent of present language use in the post-pandemic information age. Expressions such as 'being stuck in one's bubble' indicate that the overabundance of available (mis-)information on political crises, war and climate change can result in people retreating into their personal socio-material comfort zone (Iacus and Porro 2021; see Vaccari and Valeriani 2021). Bubbles resonate in this context with milieu or social sphere, similar to what Peter Sloterdijk (2024) conceptualises in the first book of the spheres trilogy (see Abels 2016). Specifically, however, what affordances and functions does the metaphor of the bubble present? My polemic answer is that bubbles serve no purpose beyond ephemeral aesthetic pleasure. A bubble comes into being, exists in a fragile state for a short period during which it may be appreciated, and then bursts. The metaphor of the bubble has been prominently employed to describe the drastic reconfiguration of individualised music listening practices since the new Millenium (Bull 2005, 2006). Rather than Michael Bull's notion of the auditory bubble created through personal stereo technologies such as the Apple iPod, I argue in this section that vibratory labour across Mājro creates sonic cocoons that circumscribe intentional boundaries around liminal spaces in which *ṃōṇōṇōū* manifests. Bull argues that the sensation of social cohesion mediated through music playback immediately disappears once the audio is switched off, leaving listeners in 'an experiential void often

described with various degrees of apprehension or annoyance. Left to themselves with no distractions, users often experience feelings of anxiety' (Bull 2000: 33). Bull's claim only represents a partial aspect of how sound facilitates changes in the perception of space through social cohesion. Liminal spaces in Mājro are characterised by continuous and intersecting sonic patterns such as the sound of the ocean and lagoon interlaced with traffic, construction and maintenance noise. Their characteristics can therefore not sufficiently be explained through the bubble metaphor in the sense that there is a sonic void underneath it. The embodied and mediated use of sound in the context of ludic appropriation, through the voice and the body in combination with musical instruments and/or audio speakers, and transformational processes such as social bonding, learning and growth are unfolding and creating wellbeing in the process. A key constituent is that it is the norm in Mājro for *ainikien* to be shared. Individualised music listening through headphones is uncommon. Instead, the in-built speakers of devices make the consumed sounds also audible to people nearby.

This characteristic of constantly intersecting acoustic territories in Mājro necessitates the re-evaluation of two aspects in Bull's work: his rendition of Adorno's (1973, 1976) loose concept of 'we-ness' and his notion of the auditory bubble. Adorno's we-ness is characterised by a qualitative relationship of 'being with' implying that direct experience is replaced with technological mediation (Bull 2000: 28). We-ness as a sense of social cohesion in a mediated world can be 'usefully thought of as learnt and embedded in the consumption of television, radio and music reception in the home and elsewhere' while the 'desire for mediated forms of technologized experience becomes part of the sedimented meaning structure of users' everyday experience' (Bull 2000: 32). In a nutshell, we-ness describes 'a reconfigured, technologized space in which users feels [sic] accompanied and not alone' (Bull 2000: 187) as technology facilitates the impression of connection. Sound and music are transformational drivers in the individual's relationship with the social network of wider society for Adorno. As music has the tendency to envelop the listener, it generates the sensation of immediacy and social proximity between people through total mediation (Adorno 1976). Listening is, for Adorno, pre-individualistic and embodies the orientation towards a collectively shared state of perception. That music is rooted in collective spiritual and religious practices is then not the origin of a teleological development of cultures towards individualised notions of freedom that follow Anglo- and Eurocentric imperialist parameters. Rather, this sonically facilitated collective sense of embodiment is the distinctive sensory driver of music for Adorno, and where this collective sense is no longer realised, music is 'necessarily degraded almost to a fiction – to the arrogance of the aesthetic subject, which says "we", while in reality it is still only "I" – and this "I" can say nothing at all without positing the "we"'(Adorno 1973: 18–19). The connection with cultural products such as TV shows and music recordings expresses the wish of overcoming the everyday through a mediated sensation of we-ness. This state 'thus might be seen dialectically as

colonizing the user's desire for social attachment, thereby creating new forms of experiential dependency within the emancipatory desires of the user' (Bull 2000: 123).

Bull assumes, in line with Schafers (1993) notion of lo-fi and hi-fi soundscapes, that the environment is growing increasingly noisy. Rather than wishing to offset this noise with silence, however, 'users demand their own noise to drown out the fear associated with a silence that throws the user back into their own state of being' (Bull 2000: 26). In Mājro, the underlying sound of waves, however, never ceases. This sonic quality of living on an atoll is especially demonstrated during power outages when abruptly almost all mediated sounds are cut off and return the underlying sound of waves to the conscious ear. This aspect is also inscribed in the mediation of sound, as almost any type of sound recording will contain the sound of the ocean on it. The filmmakers Viviana and Mark Uriona reflected on this aspect while shooting footage in Mājro for their documentary film One Word. After recording their first interview in the basement of a building, where they hoped that no traffic or other noises would be audible, Viviana found that:

> there was something subliminal in the background. And then we researched and took the entire recording device apart and found nothing until we clarified, until we checked that it was simply the sea that was accompanying us the whole time [...] [as] white noise. [...] And then we already knew how to deal with it: if you show that it's the sea, then it doesn't bother you anymore. But ultimately, in retrospect, I found it funny that no one was bothered by what we secretly heard every time during the film
>
> (Viviana Uriona 2024, personal communication).

Nevertheless, in the continental urban contexts of industrialised countries that Bull discusses, individualised stereo use is the primary answer to the increase of environmental noise. The alienating qualities of the urban environment (see Bauman 1993, 2007) lead people to 'transcend their everyday urban experience through the creation of a privatised auditory bubble in which they can control or neutralise these negative experiences of the city' (Bull 2006: 133). This auditory bubble draws a clear delineation between the user and the presence of strangers and their sounds which are supposed to be blocked out through personal stereo use. By surrounding themselves with their own sounds, users create 'a sense of their own space and a sense of order for themselves as they moved through the street or as they sat in a crowded tube or bus' while sound forms a 'boundary demarcator enabling users to operationalise a range of strategies to negotiate crowded urban space' (Bull 2006: 134). Bull uses the metaphors of the bubble and cocoon interchangeably to describe the transformation of public space into familiar habitable places through personal music curation (Bull 2000: 26). The use of personal stereo devices, however, does not only individualise people but can also 'produce a collective bubble

that distinguishes users from non-users' (Bull 2000: 112). Personal stereo devices such as smartphones have become tools for filling liminality, whether it is temporal gaps between duties, errands and appointments or spatial while traversing liminal spaces such as metro and train stations during commutes. Users seek to 'achieve a level of autonomy over time and place through the creation of a privatised auditory bubble' which facilitates the management of space and time (Bull 2005:344). These bubbles privatise urban spaces for pleasure and in the process reconfigure 'our understanding of both the meanings that we might attribute to the urban street and of meanings attributed to the time spent moving through those streets' (Bull 2005:347). Sound blurs the boundary between the affordances of urban space and simultaneously bestows its liminal and non-place (Augé 2008) characteristics with personal emotions, associations and memories. Bull states that three characteristics structure this experience: the cognitive, how users manage their inner emotional state through music, the aesthetic guiding the perception of the outside world and the moral depicting the relationship with other people. Mobile audio reproduction devices 'continually confront and inform us with how we construct our sense of the social through them and consequently how we negotiate shared space socially' (Bull 2006: 133).

This process challenges Auge's notion of non-places which separates between designed affordances and their use (Augé 2008: 94). Augé contends that non-places are liminal in the sense that their primary affordance is to be passed through, time measurement is their key characteristic, which is sonically indicated, for example, through departure announcements in an airport (Augé 2008: 104). Bull responds that any space can be experienced as a non-space, given that 'the meaning of space and time is also the result of a cognitive orientation to space' (Bull 2005:351). This orientation is shaped through the personal regulated use of sound 'that mediates the experience of whatever space is passed through and regulates the flow of time' (Bull 2005:351). Personal audio devices empower users to transform their multi-sensorial perception of space and time through a 'post-fordist use of sound within a Fordist sound space in which one worker is being fed a diet of commercial radio, the other her randomised, yet personal playlist on the iPod' (Bull 2006: 145). In my view, mediation is not a necessary condition for achieving this – a reorganisation of spaces as places in Mājro through applying *ainikien* as sound vibratory labour can be achieved through *ainikien* as the voice[2], whether it is through cheers, roro or the sonic resilience of Marshallese women losing their singing voice due to effects of radiation poisoning (see Schwartz 2021). Bull's perspective on the auditory bubble and the mediated use of sound is socio-culturally and materially limited to industrialised urban contexts and the use of headphones. The massification of portable and rechargeable Bluetooth speakers in the 2010s has technologically recontextualised the use of public listening technologies, comparable to how cassette boomboxes facilitated the playful appropriation of urban space through sound from the 1980s onwards (see Duester 2025). Speakers ranging from the ones used in phones that produce shrill and distorted

sounds to large LED-lit boom boxes sonically demarcate spaces of leisure and work across Mājro. Environmental sounds of waves, traffic and construction noise are not blocked out through technologies such as noise-cancelling headphones but are recontextualised through *ainikien* and the *bōro*.

What I describe as sonic cocoons is an attempt at encapsulating these dynamics through shifting and permeable sonic boundaries. Through the playful use of *ainikien* and the *bōro*, the sonic cocoon embraces liminality as it does not intentionally block or drown out surrounding sounds but mixes with them. The sonic cocoon does not circumscribe a seemingly solid boundary between private and public space that suddenly implodes once the sound stops. Rather, it creates permeable, flexible acoustic territories (LaBelle 2010) that are adaptable to the expanding and contracting spatial and acoustic flows of the atoll (see Diaz 2011: 28). Bull claims that the users of personal stereos synchronise 'the world to their own private soundworld - the world walks in step to the iPod user' (Bull 2006: 137). Unfortunately, in conceptualising the auditory bubble, Bull is not consistent with his terminology, as he uses 'soundworlds' and 'soundscapes' interchangeably, neither explaining their scope nor qualitatively relating them to what he calls 'auditory bubbles'. In my view, it is necessary to relativise this focus on individualised audio use. The sonic cocoon highlights the qualities of reconfigured liminal spaces through a communal use of *ainikien* through speakers, the bōro and materials such as sticks, pebbles and palm leaves. Auditory bubbles isolate while sonic cocoons describe the application of sound knowledge for communal socio-spatial transformation. That sound also acts as a driver of wellbeing in the ludic appropriation of public spaces without the mediation of audio playback devices, which has also been scrutinised beyond Bull's work. In relation to sounds of everyday life, for example, Linda O'Keeffe notes that the barking of dogs near a tenement in Dublin 'created a safety net' or 'sonic bubble' which the residents felt protected by as it 'informed the inhabitants of the threat of outsiders' (O'Keeffe 2016: 224). While O'Keeffe notes that this phenomenon could be encapsulated by LaBelle's (2010) acoustic territory, it is also noteworthy that in the Marshall Islands sounds have been used as indicators for visitors/intruders approaching for a long time. The filmmaker Mark Uriona mentioned an anecdote related to ṃūṃūṇṃūṇ (Figure 2.2), the sound of treading feet, that he heard from his friend whose family lives on an island outside of Mājro's commercial district:

> They always scatter coral stones around their houses. […] And he said there are various theories about it, including the one that it keeps vermin away or weeds or something, but he thinks that's all nonsense. The majority opinion is that you can hear an approaching visitor early on, because walking on the stones makes a very specific noise, and if you're a bit practiced, you can even tell: Is that a dog or a child? Or is that a person, a big, grown person? And then I asked him if he was kidding me or something, because we like to make fun of each other too. And then he

Figure 2.2 Textures of the coral reef.

> said, quite seriously, that this was actually common practice even before the arrival of the Europeans
>
> (Mark Uriona 2024, personal communication).

Another area that highlights the connection between the body, sound and the playful use of the city is in the emerging field of skate studies. Paul O'Connor has put forward a notion of skaters occupying 'a liminal space as mediators of pollution, working with spaces that are problematic socially and adopting them as ludic' (O'Connor 2024: 9). By rolling, jumping over, sliding and grinding on concrete and asphalt surfaces, skaters use the improvised and serendipitous affordances of public space to gain wellbeing. Skateboarding achieves this by combining material and sonic qualities in its ludic engagement with urban space. Carla J. Maier (2016) investigates the intersectional qualities of skateboarding's sound from the perspective of female skaters. She proposes that skateboarding is rooted in tacit knowledge 'inextricable from its sonic and corporeal characteristics' (Maier 2016: 27) within the socio-spatial relationship between the skater's body, the skateboard and the city. Urban space is then not limited to immobile architecture but a social environment that 'becomes meaningful through the people that live in it, that use it and thus define its physical and social form' (Maier 2016: 27).

Using sound as an embodied perception of the world, Maier argues that skateboarding, in which sonic vibration is first perceived through the lower limbs before it reaches the ears, opens a new perspective on the relationship

between the city and its sonic qualities. Maier understands skateboarding as an epistemology in which embodied forms of kinaesthetic, sonic and tacit knowledge overlap (Maier 2016: 28; Polanyi 1986). Sound becomes in this setting the linking agent between the necessary balance and orientation to control a skateboard in its interaction with the surfaces of the city (Maier 2016: 33; see also Hölsgens and Glenney 2024). O'Connor et al. (2025) identify that sound is used to 'verify the success of their manoeuvres, judge the veracity and capacity of surfaces for use, harness it as a social cue, and derive a panoply of symbolic and sensual meanings from it' (O'Connor et al. 2025: 9). From the perspective of non-participating listeners, the sound of skateboarding garners two principal reactions: the perception as noise pollution and a curiosity that can result in the 'head whip' (O'Connor et al. 2025: 10). What O'Connor et al. describe as the head whip is the euphoric reaction by (former) skaters who overhear skate sounds while they are not actively skating. Hearing the sound, for example, while working next to an open window, often causes a swift turning of the head towards the direction of the sound source. 'The "head whip" exemplifies an embodied connection to skateboarding and cultural identity. To hear skateboarders share this same reaction is to comprehend a deep connection to sound and its associations' (O'Connor et al. 2025: 10). The head whip is therefore connected to the intricate interplay between the skateboarders' body, the board's materiality and the artificial surfaces of the city. O'Connor et al. conceptualise this relationship as texturology, reflecting the skateboard's function of mediating and mapping the city's surfaces through its sonic properties.

What does this mean for the ludic appropriation of liminal space in Mājro? During my participant observation sessions throughout the atoll, I noticed that the head whip phenomenon occurs in different circumstances that extend beyond the scope of skateboarding. There are three principal ball sports practised across the Marshall Islands: baseball, volleyball and basketball. Two out of the three can be conducted comparatively flexibly in relation to ground conditions. Basketball, arguably the most popular ball sport in the Marshall Islands (Rare Earth 2024; Trans World Sport 2014) requires a dense, flat and even surface on which a ball can bounce. These ground conditions for playing basketball also apply to skateboarding, making the sono-spatial qualities of the phenomena described in skate studies comparable to the ones occurring in Mājro. The sound of a volleyball being slapped or a basketball hitting the ground are equally creating the head whip phenomenon for people in Mājro. Sonic cocoons created through the sounds of ball sports also draw in more participants who may hear that a game is taking place before they are able to visually confirm it. This aspect not only aligns with the characteristics described in the head whip phenomenon but also with Henri Lefebvre's claim that space is often heard before it is seen (Lefebvre 1991). Given that the sonic conditions of ludic appropriation can be described as a 'stream of layered complexity' (Abels 2022b: 165), the next section of this chapter develops a methodology for tracing the sono-material

layers within the transition from liminal space to social places of assembly or jikin kweḷọk.

2.3 The Sono-Material Affordance Circuit

In this final section, I will develop a method for visually highlighting the relationship between affordances, materiality and sound in the appropriation of liminal space. I call the resulting diagram the SMAC. I will apply SMAC in Chapters 3 and 4 to highlight the relationship between space, affordances and sound as complex and at times contradictory elements of everyday life in Mājro. To develop SMAC, I will contextualise Labelle's (2010) acoustic territories with Thomassen's provocative opinion that liminality 'explains nothing. Liminality is. It happens. It takes place. And human beings react to liminal experiences in different ways. Those ways cannot be easily predicted. But they can be analysed and compared, and at the formal level, they share important properties' (Thomassen 2016: 7). To trace a connection between these 'important properties', I draw on Birgit Abels' (2018a, 2022a) theory of sound knowledge as a passageway between sound and the felt-body to explore the sono-material qualities of wellbeing in Mājro, which I will frame through Marshallese *m̧ōņōņōū*. Drawing on Labelle's acoustic territories is productive as he treats them not as fixed locations but as transitional areas in which 'movements between and among differing forces, full of multiplicity' (LaBelle 2010:xxv) take place. Acoustic territories are relational and require 'something between, an outside; a geography of intimacy that also incorporates the dynamics of interference, noise, transgression' (LaBelle 2010: xvi–xvii). Providing a useful contact point between this kinetic perception and sonic epistemology, Labelle contends that sound forms a 'micro-epistemology' through a 'relational geography that is most often emotional, contentious, fluid, and which stimulates a form of knowledge that moves in and out of the body' (LaBelle 2010:xxv). Following Edmund Carpenter and Marshall McLuhan (1970), he agrees that acoustic space is shaped in real-time as a sphere without clear focus and defined boundary. His work, however, does not explicitly address liminality. When liminality is implied, for example, in his recurring claim that acoustic territories are created by sound transgressing private and public life, he presupposes a universally shared and clear-cut understanding of the boundary between private and public space. In these scenarios, sound functions as an intermediary force that weaves 'an individual into a larger social fabric, filling relations with local sound, sonic culture, auditory memories, and the noises that move between, contributing to the making of shared spaces' (LaBelle 2010:xxi). As he frequently illustrates his arguments with examples from architecture in North America, the UK and Europe, it becomes clear that his understanding of urban space is based on continental and moderate climate parameters in which a material and social separation between the inside of the home and the outside of public space is considered mandatory for comfortable and safe living. This premise's structural features, such as double-glazed windows, windproof

doors and insulated walls offsetting noise extending ‘between apartments, either from appliances or from neighbors’ (LaBelle 2010: 166). LaBelle frames the home as a space in which the physical and emotional needs of ‘an interior self to domestic space’ are literalised as ‘an extremely sensitive construction, which is revealed in the nuanced control of the domestic soundscape and its ultimate disruption’ (LaBelle 2010: 52).

As in many urban areas across Oceania (see Lockwood 2004), domestic and public space in Mājro are principally intertwined as neighbours, work colleagues, church members and close and distant family members move freely between open and half-enclosed dwelling, commercial, worship and workspaces. Even if a church, for example, is built with glass windows and not flyscreens, they’re often kept open so that the breeze can enter the building while simultaneously carrying songs and prayers outside its walls (see Section 4.1 in Chapter 4). Possibly the spatial feature with the most obvious liminal qualities in LaBelle’s work is the sidewalk as ‘mediating between inside and outside, private life and public organization, the meeting of city policy and private use’ (LaBelle 2010: 108). The sidewalk coordinates ‘between an interior and an exterior, between different sets of rhythms’, in turn creating a ‘space or topography that positions the body between an inside and an outside; within the urban milieu, the sidewalk is the site for the potentiality and related problematics of social expression’ (LaBelle 2010: 88). The different types of *iaḷ* (road) in Mājro feature paved sidewalks only in short sections. More common is *apar*, thin stones that border the bitumen of the road on both sides. After rain showers flood roads and their surroundings, balancing between large puddles on the apar stones is a common way of how pedestrians use the improvised affordances of these boundary markers. During floodings, the apar stones become micro-liminal spaces on which some pedestrians travel, seemingly resembling the atoll with its reef patched in between the ocean and waters of the lagoon. Indeed, Mājro’s pedestrians walk on the side of the road while weaving through potholes, past packs of stray dogs and playing children, through a continuous sonic blend of private and public life. The sides of iaḷ do in this sense not limit but facilitate a liminal mixing of the manifold aspects of everyday life in Mājro through a continuous layering of *ainikien*. Labelle’s notion of the acoustic territory requires an extension here to account for a more flexible understanding of public and private space, especially as the concrete and steel architecture which encloses and shuts out sound that LaBelle presupposes as standard for his argument is imbued in Oceania with colonially enforced lifestyles (see Kupferman 2011). Where there is air circulating, traversing walls, there are sounds moving in between the material constituents of everyday life. Therefore, I propose the inclusive consideration of liminal qualities in acoustic territories as a basis for the exploration of how *ṃōṇōṇōū* is achieved through ludic appropriation.

Birgit Abels addresses the relationship between liminality and sound while scrutinising Peter Sloterdijk’s sonosphere. Acknowledging that the ‘focus on in-between spaces rather than on presumed entities, on border areas rather

than on territories and on processes rather than on carefully constructed objects of study' (Abels 2016: 137) accelerates contemporary thought, she attends to Sloterdijk's claim that 'hearing ourselves is enough' (Abels 2016: 138). Sloterdijk, in many aspects an intellectual outlier, has managed through his subjective commentary to maintain a career somewhere between the spheres of academia and popular culture. His erratic opinions on political issues have grown remarkably problematic since German chancellor Angela Merkel's 2015 shift in migration politics (Cicero 2016), particularly so against the backdrop of strengthening fascism in Europe. Abels focuses on Sloterdijk's notion of the sonosphere that he developed in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Life is formed in Sloterdijk's understanding through the creation of spheres that, while never absolute entities, can manifest as social milieus, collectives and relational spaces in which listening is contextualised. Whether individually or in groups, people 'have to tune in to the world into which they are born, and, since they do this auditively, the sonosphere is one of the most fundamental spheres' (Abels 2016, 140). Social cohesion is created by individuals being in tune through listening. In spheres, human practice and place overlap and create sensations of belonging in which 'existing and listening together are barely distinguishable from one another' (Abels 2016: 143; Sloterdijk 2008, 2024). Within the sonosphere as a macro space, there exist phonotopes as smaller listener communities on a meso- and micro-level. Through this socio-spatial connection to sound, sonic practices such as music making and listening are in Abel's reading of Sloterdijk methods for negotiating and manipulating 'our individual relationship to our physical environment and the social configurations within and through which we move' (Abels 2016: 144). Besides framing her interpretation through the intellectual in-between space of Sloterdijk's ambivalent language (Abels 2016: 141), Abels does not specifically address the materiality of liminality in which sonic practices as expressions of socio-political in-between states manifest. She nevertheless draws on Ingold to maintain that instead of hearing a 'soundscape' as a distinctively delineated entity unfolding in time and space, 'we identify specific sounds within all the sounds surrounding us. Only by distinguishing the specific (for instance, a piece of music) from the non-specific (all sound surrounding us), do we actually hear a piece of music that plays in the crowded and noisy environment that we move through' (Abels 2016: 139). Following Ingold's notion that 'sound is not what we hear – it is what we hear in' (Abels 2016: 139), she argues that the lived human experience is enclosed by sound meaning that 'we continuously experience sound' (Abels 2016: 140).

Her work on sound knowledge nevertheless provides a basis for evaluating liminality's sonic characteristics, as it 'revolves around the notion of music-making as a passageway of knowing' (Abels 2022b: 167). She links this understanding to Epeli Hau'ofa's (1994) framing of the Pacific Ocean as a connecting entity between islands and their inhabitants. Hau'ofa's 'sea of islands' (Hau'ofa 1994), in which the sea connects locales, however, implicates that the ocean also functions as a liminal space through which the material and cultural transition of Oceanic lives in the Anthropocene oscillates. This aspect is reflected

in Ingersoll's seascape epistemology, which argues for 'a knowledge about the ocean and the wind as an interconnected system that allows for successful navigation through them' resulting in 'an approach to life and knowing through passageways' (Ingersoll 2016: 6). While sound knowledge exists before Abels' conceptualisation as 'a nondiscursive form of affective transmission resulting from acts of listening' (Kapchan 2015: 34), she locates it in line with Oceanic cultures' understanding of practices that in the Global North are categorised as performing arts. Knowledge production and reception is in occidental culture inevitably joined to epistemological considerations of the qualia and mind-body problem (Crane and Patterson 2012). In indigenous wisdom, however, 'ideas about music and dance are incommensurate with the mind-body divide and other binary ontological categories' indicating that 'music-making transcends inside and outside by way of its primarily corporeal experiential quality and, at the same time, relates to both' (Abels 2018a: 24). As a processual form of knowing, sound knowledge manifests in a liminal space between materiality and experiential resonance, as Abels presumes that music never fully manifests but is 'only ever becoming, and that becoming interlaces with our own becoming' (Abels 2022b: 165). Sound is inscribed in the ever-changing materiality of the lived-in world and 'humans relating to that world' (Abels 2018a: 24). The embodied experience of sound is pre-reflective in the sense that it occurs before language can assign meaning to it (see Abels 2018b). This implies that sound knowledge is a processual form of knowing that creates 'efficacy from the experiential impact of its own unfolding in sound' (Abels 2018a: 24) with music, for example, exceeding its often-imposed representational function. Music directly affects and interacts with 'the felt-body as a continuous, amorphous stream of layered complexity' which 'straddles the territorial boundaries of the material and the immaterial, of the referential and the essential' (Abels 2022b: 165). In my view, this straddling of 'territorial boundaries' pinpoints the central quality of sound knowledge as an epistemology rooted in implicit liminality. Through the lens of sound knowledge, music cannot be understood by merely dissecting and indexing its components. Rather, it implies being engrossed in and navigating its 'layered complexity' while embracing the 'transformative modality of knowledge' (Abels 2022b: 165) accompanying this process which is never fully realised in one state or another but in between states. Sound knowledge as an epistemology implicates 'a knowledge arising from specifically sonic practices of rendering time and space as experienceable' (Abels 2022b: 166) which connects it with the production and perception of sounds outside of the opaque scope of music. William Gaver notes that the perception is principally characterised by listening 'to the things going on around us, with hearing which things are important to avoid and which might offer possibilities for action' (Gaver 1993: 2). The sound-producing event is of more concern in this decision process than the sound itself, leading Gaver to conclude that its 'experience seems qualitatively different from musical listening and is not well understood by traditional approaches to audition' (Gaver 1993: 2). The *ṃōṇōṇōū* achieved through and within the *ainikien* of everyday life is then tacit knowledge in the sense that it

is 'not solely rational but incorporates a practical, performative and corporeal dimension. It is knowledge through the body, and through the practice of doing something with your body' (Maier 2016: 28).

I consider sound knowledge to be a passageway towards the embodied understanding of oneself, others and the environment. For me, this passageway leads to the use and reception of sound as *ainikien* beyond the scope of music. Framed through the lens of vibratory labour, sound knowledge represents the interconnectedness of the material world, the felt-body and sociality through a nexus of intersecting vibration. Although Abels' sound knowledge emanates from Palauan culture and presents an Oceanic onto-epistemology that can be located within Pugh and Chandler's (2021) Anthropocene islands framework, I do not intend to re-configure either of these theories from the ground up. Rather, I interpret sound knowledge as the passageway between the felt-body and spatial affordances as a basis for investigating the sonic qualities of liminality. Based on this, the sono-material affordance circuit as a visual representation of these dynamics can be developed in three steps (Figure 2.3).

The first step identifies urban space as principally designed for function in the sense that it is characterised by enabling and constraining affordances that prescribe desired use (Stevens, Daly, and Dovey 2024). Ludic appropriation, for example in the form of play or dance, focuses on improvised and serendipitous affordances to temporarily turn liminal space into *jikin kwelo̧k*, a social place of assembly in which *m̧ōn̄ōn̄ōū* is created. From the perspective of neoliberal urban design, this type of social place is non-functional, as it replaces intended and constraining affordances with, among other practices, unproductive yet insurgent play (see McDuie-Ra 2025). Through regulatory policy

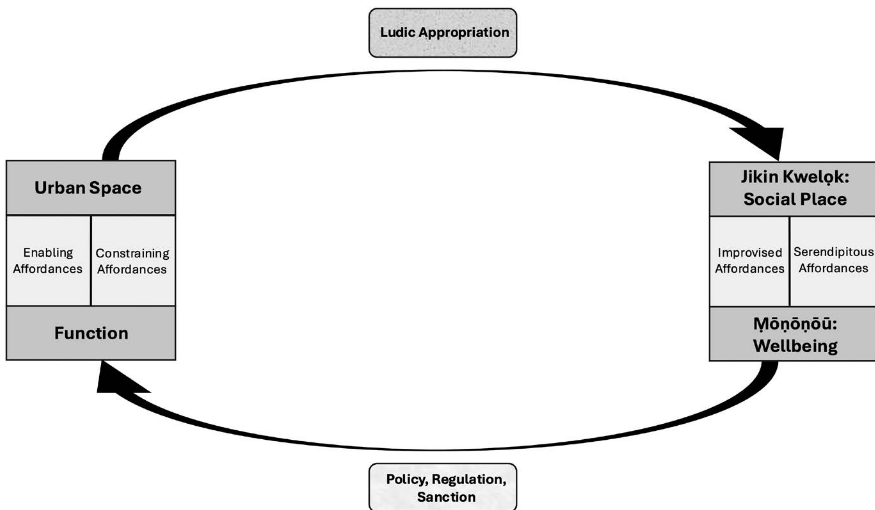

Figure 2.3 SMAC – First stage.

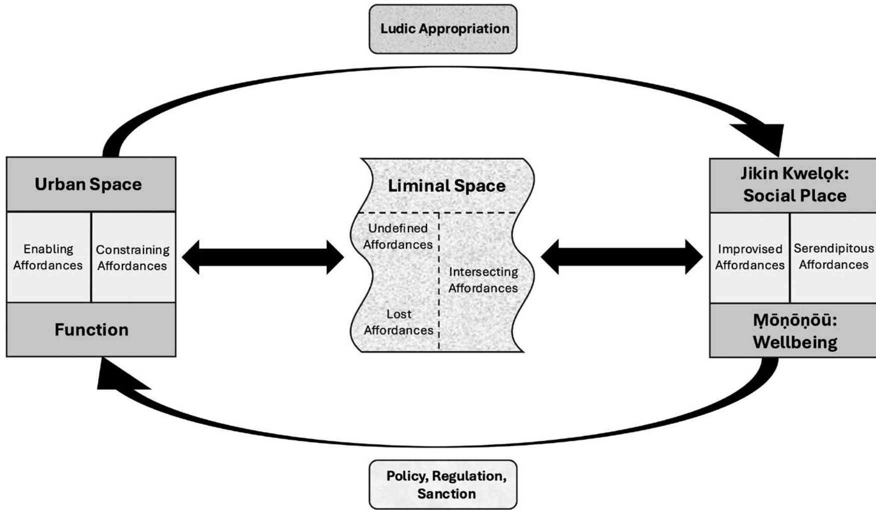

Figure 2.4 SMAC – Second stage.

and sanction, the places of sociality created through ludic appropriation are returned to the functionality of urban space. There are several routes that this dynamic can follow: improvised play and celebration spaces can be temporarily tolerated, gain official status or get redeveloped to yield such a recognition. In a negative sense, they can also face forced closure, destruction and sanctioning of practitioners through fines or even incarceration. The second step implements the sono-material qualities of liminality between the functionality of urban space and the sociality of jikin kweḷọk (see Figure 2.4). This indicates that ludic appropriation and policy, regulation and sanction can directly turn urban space into social place and vice versa, as indicated by the curved outside arrows, or shift in the liminal space between these two states as symbolised by the bi-directional arrows on the left and right. Liminal space is characterised in this context by a nexus of undefined, intersecting and lost affordances.

The third step (see Figure 2.5) illuminates the sono-material continuum between urban space, social place, ludic appropriation as well as policy, regulation and sanction. With the material qualities represented on the top and the sonic qualities on the bottom, the continuum is connected to the transformative forces of ludic appropriation and sanction through curved lines. The different colour schemes highlight that ludic appropriation generates jikin kweḷọk in a material sense through the creation of temporary sports fields, playgrounds and event spaces which it achieves sonically through music, chants and announcements that create a reinforcing sonic cocoon. Policy, regulation and sanction then act on material formants such as decay, redevelopment and urban planning. Sonically, these liminal aspects are represented in the sounds of traffic, aeroplanes, ships, labour and construction noise, as well as *rorror*, the barking of (feral) dogs. The dotted lines between the bi-directional arrows

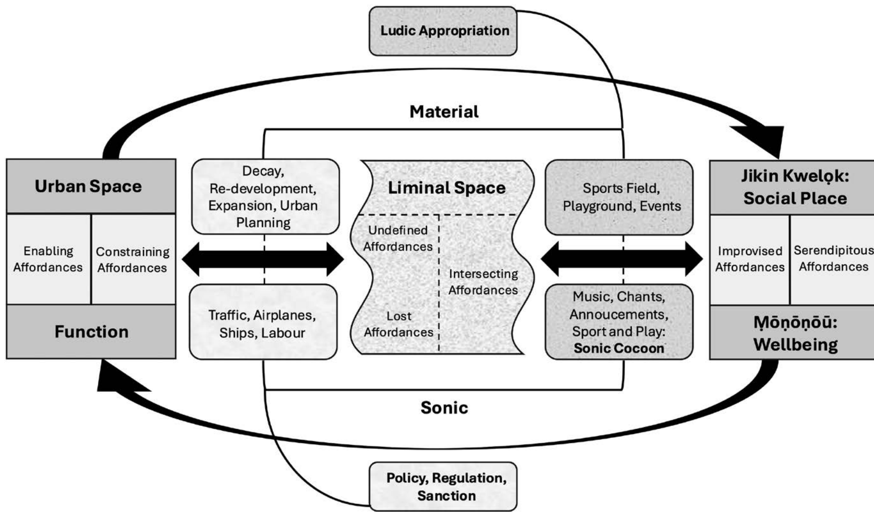

Figure 2.5 SMAC – Third stage.

indicate the permeable qualities of the sono-material formants that constitute liminal space. Aligning with the bi-directional positioning of the arrows, the sono-material continuum that shapes the transitions between urban space and social place is not self-contained but rather an open passageway in which sound knowledge (Abels 2022b), space and materiality interact, create, maintain, destroy and rebuild.

In Mājro, sound knowledge manifests in everyday life, for example, through the sounds of ball sports interlacing with the *ainikien* (voices) of cheering, quarrelling and laughter. Although there are sanctioned spaces for recreation such as parks and sports fields all over Mājro, they, due to the layout of the atoll and the city that has been built on top of it, often exist in liminal spaces with material boundaries contested by the ocean and lagoon tides and various forms of traffic. SMAC facilitates ways of tracing the material and sonic qualities of everyday life that maintain not only the flows of work, duties and errands but how these flows are intersected with people's improvised and serendipitous achievements of wellbeing and belonging among the liminality of urban space. As there is not one form of liminality, there cannot be one type of SMAC but different variations of what I have sketched out above. Chapters 3 and 4 present several case studies that apply SMAC in different locations and during different times of the year. The case studies discussed in the following chapters highlight three principal qualities of liminality: First, they lie in-between zones with clearly indicated intended affordances, such as parking lots, the airport strip and roads. Second, their own affordances are not explicitly identifiable as they are either lost, opaque or the space hosts a large number of overlapping affordances. Third, their spatial boundaries are flexible and shift with use. It is not my aim with this to develop an exhaustive analytical approach to liminality but one that hopefully

is inspirational. As it takes on different shapes in these scenarios, liminality is a phenomenon that never can be fully boiled down to a limited number of characteristics. While this can render the analysis of the phenomena that appear in the context of liminality an aggravating endeavour, it also provides an enriching scope for repeated nuanced inquiry.

Notes

1 Marshallese culture respects the throat as the 'seat of the emotions' (Republic of the Marshall Islands Environment Data Portal 2022) comparable to the cultural relevance that Anglo-European cultures assign to the heart (see Schwartz 2021:28).
2 Ainikien can be translated as both 'sound' and 'voice' (Republic of the Marshall Islands Environment Data Portal 2022)

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3 Ainikien

Sounds Between Blue, Green and Grey

In this chapter, I will demonstrate how *ainikien* (sound, the voice) in the form of sonic cocoons shapes the perception and subversion of liminality. I will treat sonic cocoons as places in which the abstract qualities of neoliberal urban space are subverted and temporarily turned into *jikin kwelọk*, places of social assembly, of sojourn, wellbeing and communal belonging. Sonic cocoons create forms of growth that intentionally drop capitalist notions of functionality by the wayside while indicating the sonic qualities of ludic geographies (Stenning 2025; Woodyer 2012; Woodyer, Martin and Carter 2016). This chapter analyses three locations in Mājro: Behind the capitol complex, the Airport Beach Park and Iakwe Katoj Park at the outskirts of the airport and a small lagoon beach in Wūlka (Uliga), Mājro's principal business district. Over a period of six months, I observed these locations at irregular intervals, covering weekdays, weekends and different times of the day, including the morning hours, afternoon and evening. Sometimes, I recorded what I heard with a Zoom H4n audio recorder and filmed the sites with a digital camera or my iPhone mounted onto a tripod, supplementing notes from unrecorded observations. The first section of this chapter introduces the notion of 'spots' originating from urban practices such as skateboarding that indicate a location which has enabling and constraining affordances in everyday life (Stevens et al. 2024), such as a handrail meant for guiding pedestrians up and down a flight of stairs, that then are appropriated and subverted through, for example, sliding down said handrail on a skateboard (Giamarino et al. 2023). The second section focuses on liminality between grey and green spaces. It analyses two improvised ball courts behind the abandoned capitol building in Wūlka. The third section focuses on liminality between blue, grey and green spaces. It analyses the parks on the outskirts of the airport and a small beach next to a dock.

3.1 Spots in Mājro

Perceiving urban space through a skateboarding-informed sensorium implies a sensitivity for the possibilities inherent in the improvised and serendipitous affordances (Stevens et al. 2024) of urban space. As a skateboarder myself, my perception of Mājro's urban landscape through the lens of spots helped me to

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identify locations where improvised and serendipitous affordances were used for play and wellbeing in everyday life. Filmmaker Spike Jonze, who began his directorial career producing skate videos, notes that 'skaters look at everything with yet to be defined possibilities. Nothing that is skated in the streets was ever created for skating […] but a skater saw it and saw something else was possible there' (Dietz et al. 2021). Once developed, this perception sticks with practitioners even if they cease to actively skate. Previously referred to as the skater's eye (Borden 2001, 2019; see Dietz et al. 2021), Sander Hölsgens and Brian Glenney argue for understanding skateboarding as a multi-sensorial phenomenon (Hölsgens and Glenney 2024). On the basis of this sensory expansion, I approach the case studies below from a skate sensorial basis, while seeking to form the argument that the ludic perception of undefined or unsanctioned possibilities in liminal space also occurs in practices such as basketball, the most-played sport in the urban areas of Mājro and Epjā (Ebeye) in Kuwajleen (Kwajalein) atoll (Rare 2024; Trans World Sport 2014). While in continental settings such as the United States, basketball is primarily performed on sanctioned courts. Players in the Marshall Islands also reinterpret liminal spaces to play their favourite ball sports in a fashion similar to how skateboarders appropriate the improvised and serendipitous affordances of urban space such as stairs, sidewalks and plazas. As Mājro hosts complex interlays of urban development and decay, drawing on skateboarding as a research epistemology for identifying residents' revered spots for *ṃōṇōṇōū* proved to be a productive approach. Drawing on skateboarding's multi-sensory approach to the urban environment which understands sound as vibration perceived with the entire body (Maier 2016), holds the opportunity for taking on a qualitative perspective 'below-the-knees' that focuses on 'urban politics on the ground' (Vivoni 2009: 130). I argue for an explorative methodology that documents the intersection of the architectural layers of the urban atoll with the unfolding complexity of *ainikien* as a passageway for knowing where to find *ṃōṇōṇōū* (see Abels 2022; Borden 2019: 210). This explorative methodology not only invites perspectives for documentation of dimensions of spatial and cultural memory below the knee, but it also offers ways into assessing overlooked and even neglected environs. In other words, my application of skate epistemology is based on the desire to include play as an explorative method for the qualitative documentation and preservation of cultural memory. The environment can be mapped out through 'spots' circumscribing the areas suited for the intended practice. To be able to play volleyball, for example, a spot is demarcated by a net installed either officially on a sports field or using the improvised affordances of a flat area by drawing chalk lines on the ground. For water-based practices such as surfing, rooted in the indigenous wisdom of seascape navigation (Ingersoll 2016), surfers locate surf spots by searching for wave patterns. On an atoll, these patterns are often located in seaways where the ocean is pressed through a pinch point and therefore creates higher and more erratic wave breaks than in other areas. In Mājro, the *wea*, a small passage between ocean and lagoon, for example one that is connected in the southern section

of the atoll through the Japan-Marshall's Bridge, is a spot where different forms of ludic appropriation intersect. The pier below the bridge is regularly used by fishers, while the area on the ocean side sometimes hosts surfers, and adolescents use the bridge's improvised affordance as a diving tower to jump into the *wea* below.

Skate spots are often unassuming and hidden in plain sight. The edutainment video 'SPOTS' created by the artist Daniel Paese defines a skate spot as an 'area of land that contains one or more obstacles, all of which have the potential to be skated on, over, or around' (Paese 2024, 2:12). Spots can be categorised into the two groups of 'domesticated' and 'naturally occurring'. Skateparks built with the intention to be skated belong to the first group, while 'any structures that are not built with the intention of skateboarding are considered naturally occurring spots' (Paese 2024, 2:23). This differentiation can also be applied to the ball sports regularly practised across Mājro, such as baseball, basketball and volleyball, that take place in both domesticated (courts and parks) and naturally occurring spots, such as behind the abandoned Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) capitol building (see Section 3.2). The difference between purposefully designed skate parks and the streets is drastic when it comes to stimulating the creativity and problem-solving skills of skateboarders as 'the world of naturally occurring spots is so vast and complex that it is virtually impossible to catalogue and define in its entirety' (Paese 2024, 5:36). As the material world can assume affordances beyond their initial intended design, an undefined obstacle 'forces the skater to use the spot in a more unique way and to find its meaning on their own' (Paese 2024, 5:51). Skaters share this view on the improvised and serendipitous affordances of urban space with people in need of accessibility, for example, for wheelchairs and prams. Challenging architecture's 'serious arrangements' of cohesion and balance, skateboarding as a dynamic engagement with architecture constitutes a playful oscillation that combines 'conflict and contradiction, chaos and confusion, emotion and spontaneity' while in a performative sense being closer to 'music or the declaration of poetry than it is to the sights of the visual arts' (Borden 2019: 182). In Mājro, where *al* (music) and *inọñū* (story, legend, myth) are essential components of everyday life (Elbōn 2004; Schwartz 2021) rather than the exhibiting of art pieces in museums, this perspective is aligned with the dynamics of quotidian mobility and perception of the atoll space. As Mājro's city planning after WWII has largely followed the standards of American urbanisation (see Kupferman 2011; Spennemann 1998), a ludic perception of the urban atoll that uses skateboarding as a point of departure therefore follows filmmaker Craig Stecyk's notion that 'Two hundred years of American technology has unwittingly created a massive cement playground of unlimited potential. But it was the minds of 11-year-olds that could see that potential' (Izan 1975). Approaching the ludic appropriation of liminal spaces in Mājro through the lens of skateboarding is rooted in thinking 'less in terms of spectacular images or abstract maps, and more in terms of a highly local knowledge about exactly

what to look for, where to go and when to arrive' (Borden 2019: 219). The recurring search for discovery, rediscovery and use of spots for ludic appropriation that people perform across Mājro on a daily basis aligns with the Oceanic understanding of time and space as circular while highlighting the perspectives of 'ordinary people, the forgotten people of history, who have coped and are coping with their harsh realities, their resistance and struggles to be themselves and hold together' (Hau'ofa 2000: 458). A sensory navigation of the urban atoll informed by skateboarding is effective in identifying circular practices, as it specialises in turning the 'relative meaninglessness of everyday yet accessible spaces' (Borden 2019: 201) into spots through acts of repeated trial and error. Spots existing outside officially planned and installed recreational parks, regardless of whether they belong to a skateboarding or ball sport community, are often located in liminal spaces.

I am aware that documenting quotidian wellbeing in Mājro on the basis of how skateboarding understands and uses urban space runs the risk of appearing arbitrary. In my view, it is a necessary risk as Mājro's embeddedness in the idiosyncrasies of late capitalism (see Mandel 2024; Sombart 1987) shapes its urban atoll structure through contradictory sonic and material qualities. Skateboarding, as an urban practice born out of similar contradictions, has the power to shape productive entry points into exploring how communities gain wellbeing on a grassroots basis. It is also important to highlight here that skateboarding's notion of spots is similar to surfing's screening of seascapes and multisensorial search for suitable wave patterns rooted in Oceanic seafaring knowledge. Although these skills differ from Marshallese wave navigation in and between atolls, it is nevertheless important to point out that skateboarding is increasingly embraced by indigenous communities around the globe as a ludic way of teaching, yarning and subverting existing neoliberal and settler colonial structures (APACHE Skateboards – Douglas Miles and The A Team 2024; Spinifex Skateboards 2024). The continental urbanisation that has reshaped Mājro after WWII is in many ways ill-adapted to the atoll's material qualities (Government of the Republic of the Marshall Islands 2018; Marshall Islands Journal 2024), while skateboarding, since its inception having a significant presence across Oceania in locations such as Hawai'i and Guam (Borden 2019), is highly adaptable to understanding and creatively adopting the shortcomings of urbanisation. Wallos in Hawai'i, for example, a steep rainwater ditch that cascades down the Niu Valley, has seen multiple generations of skateboarders interpreting the banks and platforms as concrete waves through surf-like carves and then later as ramps for jumps and kick turns (Borden 2019: 99). The sensibilities of perceiving the creative potential of mundane everyday spaces developed through skateboarding as an embodied practice that is shaped through the connection of the human body, vibration and the materiality of the urban environment, therefore providing a well-suited entry point for identifying ludic appropriation in Mājro. Resilient wellbeing (Palmer and Gyllensten 2015) within the contradictions of the urban environment is not only relevant for everyday life in the Anthropocene,

but it also showcases that there is a lot to learn about resilience from the people of the Marshall Islands (see Joel 2025).

3.2 Behind the Capitol: From Plop to Vibrational Architecture

Jim Hess, a social scientist who visited Mājro for the first time in the early 1990s, noticed in the commercial district 'a building that would not look out of place in Los Angeles, covered by panes of silvery reflecting glass' (Hess 2004: 187). What he saw was the RMI capitol[1], a building created in a post-modern architectural style from cascading structures of steel and glass. When I first saw the building myself, it immediately reminded me of Fox Plaza in Los Angeles, a skyscraper completed in 1988 and famously featured as the fictional Nakatomi Plaza in the film Die Hard (Figure 3.1). In other words, my first impression of the RMI capitol was that it looked out of place and like an architectural version of plop art.

Plop art, coined by the architect James Wines, is a pejorative term for public art, often in the shape of sculptures. As a spin on the category of pop art, the 'plop' describes large abstract sculptures that, especially during the 20th century, were plopped on representative plazas, often without a thoughtful integration in the surrounding environment (see Alfrey 2013). Ian Borden notes in his seminal study on skateboarding that a representative plaza 'contains elements of power, making us obey barriers and routes, informing us that transgressions will be met by hostile response, or simply reminding us of the pervasive presence of public institutions, the state, corporations and urban managers' (Borden 2019: 213). Lefebvre describes this kind of architecture as 'phallic' in the sense that it ensures that '"something" occupies this space, namely, a signifier which, rather than signifying a void, signifies a plenitude of destructive force - an illusion, therefore, of plenitude, and a space taken up by an "object" bearing a heavy cargo of myth. The use value of a space of this kind is political - exclusively so' (Lefebvre 1991: 287). This heavy cargo of myth is also present in the public reception of the capitol which people in Mājro told me once colloquially carried the name 'glass palace'. Indeed, its design stood out to me when I saw a tiny photo of it that dated back to 2008 on Mājro's Wikipedia article (Figure 3.2) (United States Department of the Interior 2025). After I had arrived and walked down the road for the first time, I found myself standing in front of a noticeably abandoned structure with a few windows missing and wires dangling in the breeze. Perplexed, I wondered whether this was the same monumental glass-pane building I had previously seen online. What I learnt later from conversations with locals was that the capitol had been constructed without a survey for structural integrity. Since its opening in August 1993, the building had been sinking into the ground, likely due to the spongy coral underneath compacting under its weight. By 2008, 'occupants of the fourth floor, including the President's Office and Council of Irooj, had moved to the second floor of the

Figure 3.1 and 3.2 top: Fox plaza in Los Angeles, 2018. Bottom: The RMI capitol.
Source: United States Department of the Interior.

International Convention Centre (ICC) next door, where they remain till this day' (Abandoned capital to be demolished 2025). According to the Marshall Islands Journal, in early 2025, the building was vacant for 'for close to 15 years, except for an office/work area for Public Work staff on the ground floor' (Abandoned capital to be demolished 2025; see also RMI Capitol Building 2018). Since then, the structure was left to the elements and vandalism, with damage most severe inside and on the backside of the building, where large sections of the glass panes had been removed and broken (see Joel 2020). Despite the condition of the capitol, its front plaza has seen occasional use for official festivities such as a party tent after the coronation of Christopher Jorebon Loeak as *iroojḷapḷap* (paramount chief) in November 2023 (see Hosia 2023).

The lifecycle of the RMI capitol building is remarkable as it exemplifies the failed attempt at forcing US continental urbanity without adaptation into an atoll space. That the building moved on its own terms while rendering its intended affordances obsolete, represents the atoll's own vibrational labour as the coral reef resonates with the movements of its surrounding bodies of water. Gascia Ouzounian and Jan Werner develop an understanding of architecture 'whose energetic capacities are highlighted (not reduced); and to architectural and spatial practices that privilege vibrational phenomena, including audible and inaudible sound' (Ouzounian and Werner 2024: 240). By emphasising the vibrational qualities of buildings, they argue for a perspective that not only highlights architecture's materiality but also the 'energies that modulate and complicate those materialities' (Ouzounian and Werner 2024: 240). This perspective embraces liminality in the form of a lasting transitional state of buildings, especially those bestowed with representational qualities such as the RMI capitol. Understood as 'vibrational architecture', this perspective on buildings challenges 'the perceived fixity and stability of architectural forms and structures, including monumental architectures that are imagined as enduring and immutable' (Ouzounian and Werner 2024: 240). While Ouzounian and Werner discuss architecture that is designed for hosting sound art installations, creating buildings as vibrating bodies of sound, their conceptualisation remains limited to enabling and constraining affordances in continental industrialised countries. In the case of the RMI capitol in Mājro, however, the vibrational characteristics of the building, amplified through the ongoing vibration of the atoll's underlying coral reef as it swings with and against the surrounding bodies of water and their wave patterns (see Genz, Howard, and Aucan et al. 2009), have made both its intended and constraining affordances obsolete and created the opportunity for using its improvised and serendipitous affordances. As vibrational architecture in a negative sense, that is, by being an object that shifted erratically based on the connection with its surroundings, the building lost its affordance as an office and administrative structure. It also lost its representative character and became, as a decaying structure, an 'eyesore' in Mājro's cityscape (Marshall Islands Journal 2024). Exploring the area by foot, I was first drawn to the plaza on its frontside featuring a flat and paved surface and numerous skateable obstacles such

as kerbs and elevated planters with ledges on which slides and grinds could be performed (Figures 3.3 & 3.4). The plaza was also sonically attracting, as it featured rows of empty flagpoles on which chains were moving in the breeze, creating constantly shifting rhythmic patterns of clacking sounds.

Figure 3.3 and 3.4 top: Kinked kerb and concrete platforms on the Northern flank of the capitol. Bottom: Ledges on the Southern flank of the plaza.

The layout of these poles on the elevated grass fields and planters stood out as an interesting arrangement of concrete and grass, an assembly with improvised affordances facilitating jumping and balancing in games such as the floor is lava. However, during my observations, I never witnessed the plaza being used for play or sports besides a Japanese volunteer worker whom I occasionally met while jogging around the periphery of the plaza and practising calisthenics on the adjacent parking lot. Other people I encountered there were either maintenance workers or just pedestrians passing through the area to get to Lagoon Road or the backside of the capitol building. The square, once a representative symbol of the Marshallese *nitijeḷā* (legislature), had become a liminal space, mainly used as a passageway for pedestrians and stray dogs with an unknown status stuck in the liminal area between the government building and ruin. The parameter of the capitol and adjacent octagonal building where the *nitijeḷā* now holds its sittings is fenced off from the surrounding roads and sidewalks. Several gates in the fence are open during the day and closed by security workers with chains during the night-time. The backside of the capitol features a rear entrance that aligns with the fence. Right beside it, outside the fence, is a rectangular paved slab followed by a triangular patch of grass that hosts a single tree. To the North, the slab leads over into a dirt road that runs past two fenced-off tennis courts into a larger liminal space between the ICC and the Atama Zedkaia Memorial Hospital used for the storage of shipping containers (Figure 3.5).

To the south of the concrete slab runs a paved road; on the eastern side, cars use the dirt road to either cut through the container storage area to the front of the hospital or turn right into the parking lot south of the tennis courts and the Atama Zedkaia Memorial Hospital building (Figure 3.6). The paved slab in front of the capitol's rear entrance likely originally afforded a mixed use as drop-off zone, turning bay and parking lot for vehicles. The area presents a mixture of grey and green spaces that is typical for Mājro's commercial district.

Once I saw the rear of the capitol for the first time, it was immediately clear that this is the area of *ṃōṇōṇōū* for the local community. As nobody

Figure 3.5 Shipping containers as storage units between the Hospital, ICC and capitol.

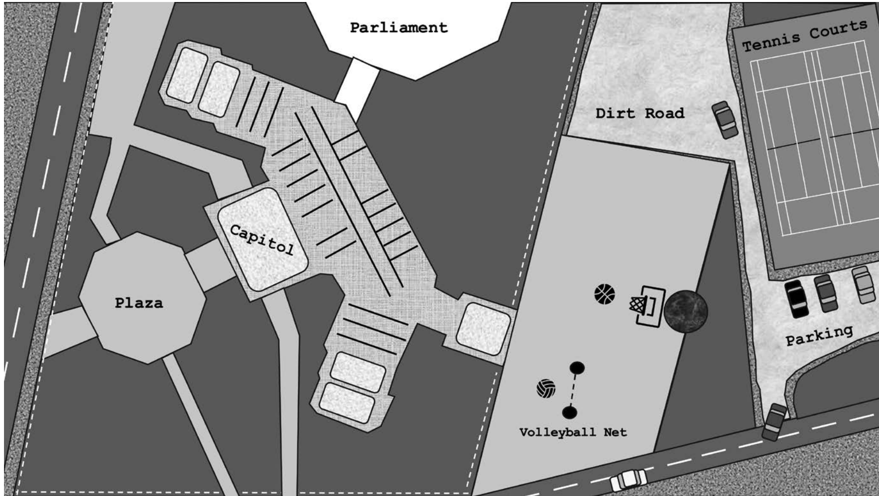

Figure 3.6 Approximation of the area surrounding the capitol building.

else uses the rear of the capitol, the area's improvised affordances have been adopted by the local community as a volleyball and basketball court. The volleyball field towards the southern end of the paved slab features a net spanned between two poles that are pinned into weighted car tires. Towards the northern end, a single basketball hoop stands next to the tree on the triangular plot of grass. While the slab's flat and even ground conditions are ideal for ball sports, the surrounding traffic renders it precarious, as rogue balls can roll at any time into traffic on three sides of the lot. What is more, there is no separation between the basketball and volleyball courts, resulting in balls and players occasionally crossing the imagined boundary while concurrent games are underway. *Kaliāpep* (joking, making fun) and *ļōkatipū* occur in these situations, emphasising a sense of togetherness in the shared space. This playful embrace of the liminal space between and around the two fields strikingly contrasts the nearby tennis courts that not only are neatly fenced off and set back from the road but were mostly unused during my observations of the area.

The exposed location of the lot raises the question of why players did not select the fenced-off front plaza of the capitol for their fields, as it gets rid of the danger of having a ball roll into the surrounding traffic while the plaza is still accessible all day from the backside of the building even when the front gates are closed. Figure 3.7 illustrates one of the reasons for why the improvised ball courts were installed on the backside: the capitol building effectively affords shading from the afternoon sun for several hours until sunset. On the front plaza, which is exposed to full sunlight throughout the day, the capitol's glass façade reflects the sun, creating additional glare in various locations on the plaza.

Figure 3.7 Improvised volleyball and basketball court behind the capitol.

While the capitol was intact, intended affordances of turning and parking vehicles as well as constraining affordances through the fence surrounding the compound and security guards working on site[2] were clearly defined. Fulfilling these affordances, the area was fully integrated into the representative and administrative function of the parliament complex. Spatially, the paved slab that now has been appropriated as ball courts is liminal, as it is sandwiched between the capitol, a paved and a dirt road and the parking lot for the hospital, making it ideal for vehicles passing through the area (Figure 3.8).

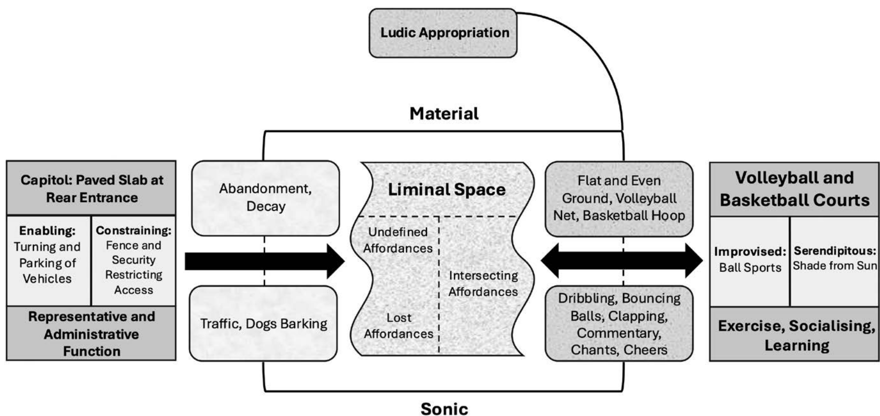

Figure 3.8 SMAC outlining the ludic appropriation of the paved slab behind the capitol.

Once the use of the building was discontinued, the area lost its intended and constraining affordances as well as its representative function through abandonment and decay. Sonically, this liminality is shaped in the sounds of the surrounding traffic and dogs frequenting the area as they started incorporating the unused capitol into their territory. As a liminal space characterised primarily by its lost affordances, the area was sitting idle before its improvised affordances were appropriated as ball courts. Materially formed by the placement of the volleyball net and the basketball hoop on the paved slab, the sonic qualities of this appropriation consist of bouncing volleyballs and basketballs, and *ainikien* as the vibratory labour of the *bōro* manifesting in *roro*, cheers, laughter and commentary mediated through Bluetooth speakers. Ball games usually begin in the afternoon after schools close around 2 pm and last until darkness or, if installed and functioning, the floodlights are turned off. This means that the games coincide with the peak traffic hours during which vehicles queue in the area surrounding the capitol. Traffic noise is at its peak during the afternoon hours, which players in the field sometimes offset with portable Bluetooth speakers and microphones used as a broadcast setup to amplify live commentary on the games. This practice is also common in the diaspora, as Jim Hess notes that while attending a Marshallese holiday in Costa Mesa, California, he once witnessed 'an announcer giving a play-by-play commentary on a baseball game through a cell phone. He was connected, I was told, to the studios of V7AB, the national radio station in Majuro, which was broadcasting the game' (Hess 2004: 191). On different occasions, I noticed that the sounds of a bouncing volley or basketballs or commentary through speakers created a head whip (O'Connor, Glenney, and Boutin 2025) reaction from children and teenagers frequenting the area, who were immediately drawn to the origin of the sound. Reactions that I noted were either watching the games for some time and then carrying on, joining in as a player or hanging out for longer periods, often using the improvised affordances of the steps in the capitol's rear entrance as a platform for sitting. *Ainikien* creates here a sonic cocoon through 'a stream of layered complexity' (Abels 2022: 165) manifested whooping, clapping, singing and chanting. Three types of vibratory labour (LaBelle 2010) condition the liminal qualities of the resulting sonic cocoon. First, the vibratory labour of the capitol building itself as an example of negative vibrational architecture (Ouzounian and Werner 2024) has resulted in it being caught in a liminal state in which it still exists as a remnant of its former function, while simultaneously not safely affording this function anymore. Unused, the capitol and its surrounding area were caught in limbo for decades, seemingly waiting for demolition. Second, traffic with its rhythmic vibration of engines structures the area's enabling and constraining affordances while depending on the number of vehicles frequenting the roads and parking lots. Third, the *ainikien* of the people participating in and surrounding the games, through the vibrations of their *bōro*, their rhythmic claps, cheers and chants that temporarily transform the liminal qualities of the slab into a place of *ṃōṇōṇōū*.

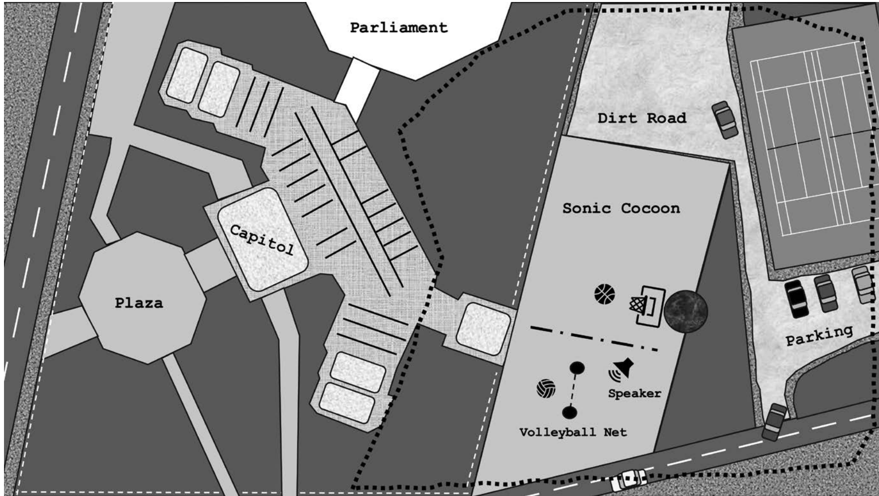

Figure 3.9 Sonic cocoon surrounding the area of the improvised ball courts.

Figure 3.9 visualises how the third category of vibratory labour manifests a sonic cocoon that circumscribes the area of ludic appropriation. The uneven line between the two ball courts represents the liminal boundary created through the *ainikien* of the games, which is sometimes amplified through speaker commentary. The space also sees use beyond quotidian play. During the New Year's celebration, for example, a group of white plastic chairs was arranged in rows in front of a decorated table with food, demonstrating that the slab not only serves the local community for their regular sports practice but also celebratory special events (Figure 3.10).

After his inauguration as the eighth president of Taiwan, Lài Chīngdé visited Mājro in December 2024 to present plans on the continuing cooperation between Taiwan and the Marshall Islands, only one of 12 nations that Taiwan has official diplomatic relations with. Besides a loan for two new aeroplanes, Lài talked about 'Taiwan's pledge to fund the demolition of a dilapidated capital building and construction of a new capital facility that is estimated to cost above $30 million. Lai said implementation of the plan "will become a new landmark" for Majuro' (Johnson 2024). Demolition of the capitol was first announced in the local newspaper in July 2024, with official work starting some time in February 2025 (Abandoned capital to be demolished 2025; Capital building to be demolished 2024; Earnshaw 2025). According to the Marshall Islands Journal, the company, Pacific International, Inc. (PII), which oversees the demolition, erected a safety fence around the parameter of the area (Abandoned capital to be demolished 2025). As for the paved slab behind the building that served as a social space of wellbeing for many of the neighbourhood's residents, there are three possible outcomes of this demolition process. First, the slab will remain untouched by the demolition and construction of

Figure 3.10 New year's eve celebration behind the capitol.

the new capitol and continue as an improvised ball court after construction work has concluded. The second outcome could see the redevelopment of the space into an official ball court with safety fencing and a permanently installed volleyball net and basketball hoop (Figure 3.11).

In the third scenario, the slab either gets destroyed to make space for the new building's fundament or becomes incorporated as part of the new capitol to, for example, once again serve as a vehicle lot or turning bay (Figure 3.12).

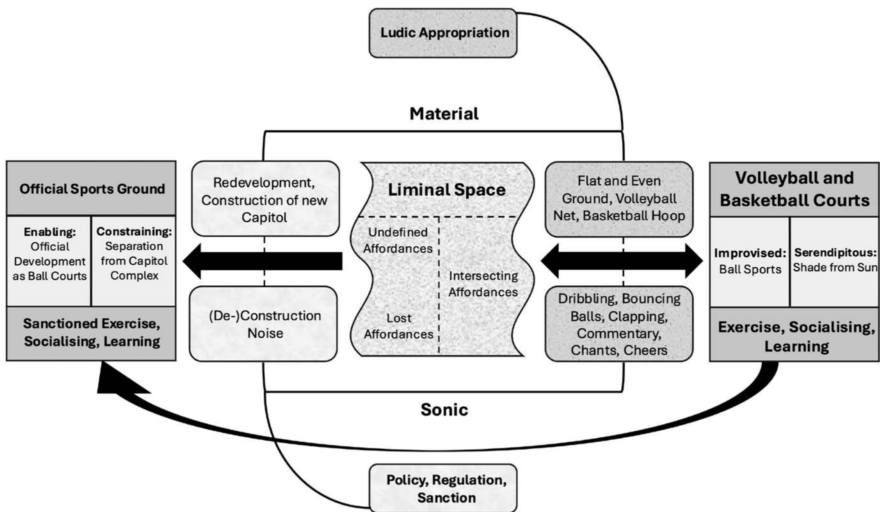

Figure 3.11 SMAC estimate of the official restructuring of the ball court.

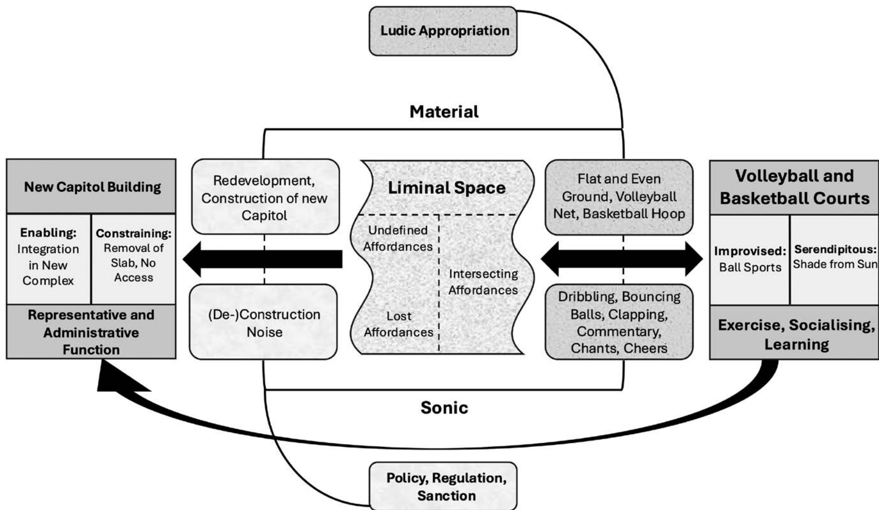

Figure 3.12 SMAC estimate of the official restructuring of the ball court behind the capitol.

Not only does Mājro and the Marshall Islands as a whole deserve a capitol built on a stable foundation but also one that accommodates the structural, climate and cultural needs of the local community. The worst case would be another ill-adapted form of plop architecture that disregards the local community's needs for exercise and play in the vicinity of their homes. The question that remains is whether the new capital will merely overwrite and erase the ludic appropriation of the liminal space which has enriched the local community with *m̧ōn̄ōn̄ōū* for years, or whether it will respect and perhaps even expand on it.

3.3 Tide Pools, Styrofoam and Aeroplanes

This section analyses Iakwe Katoj Park and Airport Beach Park, two recreational parks featuring a mix of green, blue and grey spaces located on both ends of the Mājro airport, as well as a small beach in Wūlka, a section of the atoll's business district. So far, I have focused on how the improvised affordances of liminal space are appropriated through sonic cocoons. Here, I seek to highlight how sonic cocoons are interwoven with the surrounding liminal sounds, like traversing vessels, vehicles and aircrafts. Especially due to the volume of the latter, sonic cocoons are temporarily forcefully returned to the area's liminal function. Despite there being no more active military facilities in present-day Mājro, its urban development has drawn on the previous structuring of the atoll for WWII military bases. Where now buildings like the Marshall Islands Resort, the country's largest hotel, are located, for example, used to be the former military airstrip, still visible in the form of a

straight section of Lagoon Road. Mājro's rapidly expanding population since the end of the war has strongly impacted the atoll's infrastructure, as the cultural, nautical, commercial and administrative centres, including the parliament building and hospital, were moved south-west. The construction of a new airport to the west of Rairōk, approximately a 20-minute drive from its former location, became necessary after substantial sections of Mājro were destroyed during a major storm and flooding event in 1979 that inundated most of the atoll's eastern part and required the relocation of about 5000 residents, many of whom lost their homes to the sea (see Spennemann 1998: 8). Dirk Spennemann, who worked for Mājro's historic preservation office as an archaeologist in the early 1990s, notes that the new location of the airport has created an artificial 'boundary', indicating that everything west of it is viewed as remote, whereas Rairōk, the area between central Mājro and the airport, has been developed for residential housing between 1989 and 1993 (see Spennemann 1998: 4–5). Most of Rairōk consists of residential buildings except for the rubbish tip, colloquially called 'mount trashmore', churches, mom-and-pop shops and the Taiwanese and US embassies. Spennemann notes that despite the area's narrow shape, the airport, where the land is for the most part less than 250 m wide, has almost a 'continuous line of houses both along the lagoon and the ocean side of the main road from the airport to the Delap-Uliga-Djarrit (D-U-D) area. In many instances a second row of houses has been developed between these house[s] and the lagoon, as well as the ocean shore' (Spennemann 1998: 5).

As there is not much space for building expansive sport grounds in Rairōk, locals commonly drive to the parks located on both ends of the airport. Iakwe Katoj Park, located on the eastern end of the airstrip, consists of a plot of grass next to Lagoon Road on the side facing the ocean which features a circular path, benches and a playground. On the opposite side of the road towards the lagoon is a wall created from large rocks, a parking lot and several pavilions facilitating barbecues and parties. On the western end of the airstrip is the Airport Beach Park, located near a curve near the ocean after the straight section that runs parallel to the airstrip (Figure 3.13). Characterised by passing vehicles on Lagoon Road and the airspace above, the park occupies the liminal space just outside of the airport's fence. Located on the ocean side, it consists of an upper picnic and sanitary area which is separated from the lower reef with a tide pool. The two levels of the park are demarcated by the sea wall, which is composed of large rocks.

While use of the park is comparatively sparse during the week, the weekends are busy with celebrations, relaxation, socialising and barbecues. The tide pool on the lower level becomes completely submerged during high tide. During low tide, it serves as an improvised swimming pool, including a diving board permanently installed on a rock (Figure 3.14). Similar tide pools can be found located all over Mājro; some of them naturally occurring in the reef, others artificially created through excavation. The rainwater catchment located east of the Iakwe Katoj Park, as well as the new sports complex built

Figure 3.13 The airport beach park from above indicating the two levels and tide Pool.
Source: OpenAerialMap.

for the 2024 Micronesia Games, features tide pools on the ocean-side reef affording flood control and, in the case of the rainwater catchment, prevention of the reserve from contamination with ocean water. Both the Airport Beach Park and Iakwe Katoj Park appear as an architectural afterthought after the completion of the airport, a strategy to use the extraneous liminal space on both sides of the airstrip to support residents located in the western and eastern suburbs with recreational areas. The liminality of both parks is not only indicated by their location but also by their composition of overlapping grey, green and blue spaces. Iakwe Katoj Park, for example, is an artificial green space featuring a paved path that forms a ring at the outskirts of the

Figure 3.14 Two kids playing with the springboard installed at the airport beach park tide Pool.

park with benches on both sides. During observation sessions, I noted that the path sees occasional use by employees of the Taiwanese embassy located in Rairōk who use it for jogging. Seeking out this location for jogging in an area outside of residential areas is plausible as running or even walking along the road is unsafe due to the potential of being attacked by packs of stray dogs. Unbeknownst to me in the early months of my stay, I once had to evacuate an afternoon walk prematurely by taxi, as I found myself surrounded by a pack of aggressive stray dogs snapping at me. Indeed, the location of the parks demonstrates not only the use of the liminal areas surrounding the airport but also a zone outside of the territories of stray dogs who stay close to the food sources in residential districts. Play in Iakwe Katoj Park, however, is not completely without danger; its close proximity to Lagoon Road more so renders it a place of polluted leisure (Evers 2019) as the road is frequented in this section by a comparatively high number of industrial vehicles. During one observation session, a child supervised by two women was playing on the playground for a while until he/she suddenly ran towards the road. The women who were just in a conversation moments before, began to walk after the child and grabbed it before it could reach the road. Not only does their proximity to Lagoon Road render Iakwe Katoj Park and the Airport Beach Park as sites of polluted leisure but also their close location to the airport strip. Up to three larger commercial aircrafts flying internationally and several smaller national planes frequent Mājro's airport on a daily basis. When planes approach and take off, the overwhelming noise of the low-flying aircrafts recurringly startles people (including myself) and results in games and conversations being interrupted while people raise their heads to watch the plane passing by overhead. Some children become ecstatic by the slowly intensifying rumble of the approaching plane and raise their voices until they scream at the top of their lungs trying to keep up with the thunder above. To a lesser extent, the comparatively low volume of passing by lorries on Lagoon Road can result in similar dynamics. Especially, several large lorries used by the construction company, PII, are army vehicles that are noisier than regular commercial vehicles. As an area with high safety standards, the airport is characterised by enabling and constraining affordances that manifest not only in the terminal but also in the fenced-off perimeter of the entire airport, the paved roads and parking lots and restricted-access industrial zoning surrounding it, all of which is circumscribed by the *ainikien* of traffic. The liminal space surrounding the airport, including the parks, is not only an area in which grey, green and blue spaces overlap, but also where affordances intersect. The construction of the parks and the installing of the diving board, picnic and barbecue areas, playground obstacles and sanitary facilities can be framed as an officially sanctioned ludic appropriation of the liminal space surrounding the airport, space that otherwise only serves the passing through of vehicles and aircraft. Comparable to the improvised ball courts behind the capitol, the parks are separated from the surrounding industrial zones through the *ainikien* (sound) of play in the water, music being performed

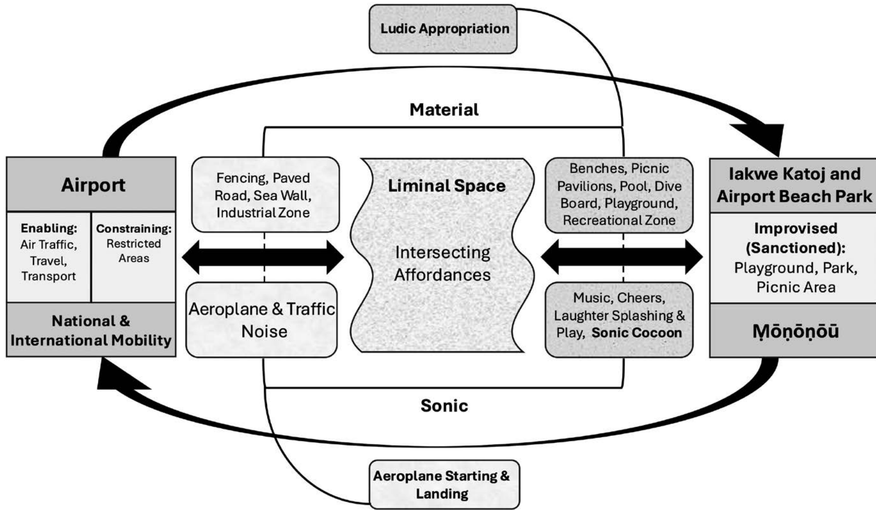

Figure 3.15 SMAC for airport beach park and iakwe katoj park.

or played through Bluetooth speakers and the *ainikien* (voices) of socialising and laughter in the picnic areas.

While I did not detect any use of serendipitous affordances, the ludic use of improvised affordances stays intact until aeroplanes approach the land or leave the airport. While not occupying the space of the parks physically, the overbearing noise temporarily returns the areas to their primary function, that is, to serve as liminal areas at the outskirts of the airport and supplementary sections for the aviation industry and its globalised flows of mobility. Due to the official design of the parks, their sonic occupation is not as vibrant in comparison to the improvised ball courts behind the capitol, while the sonic return to the areas' functionality is even more outstanding (Figure 3.15).

Sonic overlaps between the playful and industrial use of space areas also occur in other parts of the atoll, for example in Wūlka, where several small beaches are located on the lagoon side next to the docks. The lagoon and ocean accumulate rubbish on the shores, characterising practices like swimming in any part of the atoll polluted leisure (see Evers 2023). While most rubbish that lies on the reef, the beaches or floats in the water is unused, some children appropriate it for play. Most notable are large pieces of styrofoam that are either used as swim boards or floating platforms that children try to climb up and balance on. In Wūlka, there is a lagoon beach located in the corner next to a pier adjacent to the Jitak bar and restaurant. In December 2023, a mid-sized industrial ship was anchored there on which several men were working. The engine was running unevenly, creating a substantial rumbling noise and vibration that could be perceived in the surrounding water. The crew was trying to return the motor to an operable state, switching between gears which set the ship twitching in small forward and backward movements.

The noise of the engine was occasionally intersected with their shouts as they exchanged commands and feedback between the different sections of the ship. The resulting work created an industrial form of vibratory labour that sonically and physically dominated the blue space of the lagoon, the beach and the grey space of the dock. Two boys were playing in the water next to the ship, albeit at a safe distance, nevertheless in the parameter of this vibratory dominance. They were floating on styrofoam pieces, drifting in the water, climbing up and jumping back in after wrestling each other or losing balance. Suddenly, the noise of the ship's engine stopped abruptly, leaving only the sound of the lagoon's waves and voices of the children behind. The sonic contrast was stark here, indicating, similar to the examples of the Airport Beach Park and the Iakwe Katoj Park, that the dominance of industrial noise, while temporarily drowning out the *ainikien* of *ṃōņōņōū*, is nevertheless not able to completely silence it. Even though the liminality in these blue, green and grey spaces creates complex layers of overlapping sounds, the *ainikien* as vibratory labour of play and the *bōro* remain resilient among the vibrations of machines.

Notes

1. The local newspaper Marshall Islands Journal also refers to it as 'capital building'. I will stick with capitol for consistency.
2. Security guards are now primarily working in the ICC and parliament building, where they control, among other things, visitors' dress code.

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4 Lagoon Road

Concrete Waves and Liquid Sounds

Preparations for the 2023 *Kūrijṃōj* parade are at their peak. The weeks leading up to the holidays have been challenged by frequent mains failures and problems with the postal votes during the presidential election. Across Mājro, people are eagerly arranging Christmas decorations while various renditions of Feliz Navidad play in a seemingly never-ending loop in supermarkets, restaurants and, of course, car stereos. The *Kūrijṃōj* parade, covering the entire length of Lagoon Road has developed into a tradition for which parade floats are decorated and equipped with speaker systems. During the parade, people line the streets and children excitedly wave, laugh and scream with joy while the paraders on the beds of the lorries throw sweets on the street. A few days earlier, I am sitting by the window of the apartment I rent, while it is dark outside and well past dinner time. A lorry owned by Mājro's main construction company, Pacific International, Inc. (PII), is parked just outside of the window and employees of the apartment complex have been busy for hours decorating it carefully with glittery garlands and ornaments. With a 'plop', the world is at once quiet and dark, all I hear is the swoosh of the waves rolling over the reef behind the house and an irritated dog's barking in the distance. Power loss has been frequent leading up to the end of the year, but it rarely occurs at night. Outside, the preparations continue after a brief intermission of sighs and giggles while torch beams begin an erratic dance on the apartment's walls.

Lagoon Road is Mājro's principal motorway that connects the atoll's largest islands. It is also a liminal space on which a considerable portion of Mājro's everyday life takes place. Throughout the year, Lagoon Road is navigated, used and appropriated through intersecting rhythms of vibratory labour. In this chapter, I contextualise the vibration of engines with the mobile *ainikien* (sounds) of car stereos and *ainikien* (voices) of the *bōro* (Schwartz 2021), the throat as it reverberates through songs and conversations between drivers, passengers and pedestrians. With this, I highlight that sonic cocoons can be mobile and the ludic appropriation of liminality in the urban atoll is not locally fixed in place. The first section of this chapter focuses on the celebration of *Kūrijṃōj*, the Marshallese Christmas season, which starts with preparations and rehearsals in some cases as early as September and lasts until the new year. I analyse the celebration of the *jebta*[1] at Rairōk Full Gospel Church in December 2023,

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the Christmas Eve mass at the Cathedral of the Assumption and the block party in *Wūlka* for New Year's Eve. The second section highlights quotidian use of Lagoon Road through cars while drawing on Marshallese wave pattern navigation as a basis for tracing the transition of Mājro from a canoe-based to a car-based society. The third section expands on the notion of sonic cocoons as the ludic appropriation of liminal space through *ainikien*, to demonstrate that the use of sound in and outside of moving cars on Lagoon Road illustrates that sonic cocoons are mobile and that the source of *m̧ōn̄ōn̄ōū* through the improvised and serendipitous affordances of urban space do not have to be fixed in one position. I interpret Mājro's taxi drivers as asphalt wave pilots (Langlois 2016) who navigate the urban atoll's daily traffic and also analyse the recurring occupation of Lagoon Road through float parades. Treating LaBelle's (2010) vibratory labour as a golden thread in this chapter, I argue that a continuous rhythmic vibration drives the various rhythmic pulses of everyday life in Mājro. The vibration of waves mixed with the hum of engines, on the road, on the ocean, on the lagoon or in yards, pushing electrical current through the strands of the urban atoll into its finest capillaries where it resounds in huffing air conditioners, whirring lightbulbs and jingling loudspeakers. This nexus extends vibratory labour 'deeper toward the physical material plane, to link the body into an expanded field of resonating energy' (LaBelle 2010: 134). As with all types of constant vibration that partially resonate below the level of audibility (LaBelle 2010: 136), Mājro's own vibratory labour easily slips out of the realm of its inhabitants' conscious perception until it is suddenly returned to the surface of human perception through, for example, a sudden mains failure. Indeed, sonorous vibrations are ironically at their most imbuing in the glimpse of their sudden absence. Once the hum of machines and engines is gone, *lijeñūrñūr*, the continuous vibrations of waves shaking the coral reef are returned to the surface of perception with full force. Humans, are in this sense, 'only conscious of most of our rhythms when we begin to suffer from some irregularity' (Lefebvre 2013: 86) and not only sudden mains failures but also the cyclically returning Sunday epitomises this characteristic. Sundays in Mājro are noticeably quieter, as the seemingly never-ending sounds of vehicle traffic noticeably quieten down. The passing-by sonic cocoons of taxis playing music on weekdays are relocated to the churches around the atoll that liquify sonic boundaries between the inside and outside of church buildings to create flexible forms of *jikin kwelo̧k* (place of assembly). On Sunday, the community's attention is relocated from the street to the communal space of the church and the home: Audible on a Sunday morning are the vibrations of Marshallese *bōro* rather than the hum of imported engines, that is, voices singing, reciting sermons and praying surround churches across the atoll.

During the quiet afternoon and early evening, these sounds then transition into the voices of children's conversations and their laughter is mixed with the sudden high-pitched bursts of noise emanating from their smart phones as they scroll through their TikTok feeds, communicate via video calls or play online video games like Fortnite (Figure 4.1). If Mājro's rhythm is principally

Figure 4.1 Sunday in front of the Asian Development Bank building. On a weekday, the car parks are fully occupied while traffic on the road queues frequently.

conditioned by the vibrations of combustion engines on a weekday, it is the vibratory labour of globalised spirituality reverberating through the *bōro* of parishioners and voices of children as they intersect with the vibrations of their phones. The various rhythmic layers that structure Mājro's everyday require a perspective that highlights the links between urban rhythms and their sonic characteristics. Considering Lefebvre's (2013) rhythmanalysis is productive in this context as it extends its scope through an application outside of the European cities that he discusses in his work. Investigating rhythms of vibratory labour facilitates a partial structuring of the complex array of uses that render Lagoon Road as the principal liminal space in Mājro. Sound knowledge and rhythmanalysis structurally overlap in their understanding of the embodied underpinnings that both sound and rhythm contribute to how humans engage with and understand their environment. While Abels (2022: 168–69) argues that sound is capable of manifesting a 'tangible connection – not metaphorical but felt-bodily in nature', I do not understand sound knowledge as limited to a fixed epistemological state. Rather, I will continue to use sound knowledge as a passageway for making the various relationships between vibrating bodies experienceable. Unravelling some of the layers that condition the liminal qualities of Lagoon Road, I interpret *ainikien* in this context as rules of the currents that transgress liminality and territorial boundaries, so that the resulting forms of vibratory labour on Lagoon Road constitute synergetic elements of 'knowing through passageways' (Abels 2022: 167; see also Ingersoll 2016: 6).

4.1 Christmas in Rairōk and Wūlka

Jebta is the Marshallese pronunciation of the English word 'chapter'. It refers to either chapters of the bible (Schwartz 2015: 798), a group within a protestant congregation or the Christmas song fest (Marshallese-English Online

Dictionary (MOD) 2022). The *Kūrijṃōj* season is the most important celebration in the Marshall Islands and the time during which a series of markets, festivities, parades and parties are filling the air in Mājro with the *ainikien* of *alin* (song), *jar* (prayer) and *tōtōñ* (laughing) (see Carucci 1997). Indeed, singing is an integral part of *Kūrijṃōj*, and Jack Niedenthal remembers the impact Marshallese songs had on him in his first years in the Marshall Islands:

> I still remember my first Christmas. They would write there every year, original new Christmas songs. They divide the island into two […] and they would compete. They'd write their own songs, and they'd have their own practices starting in October […] you know, they'd stay up till about 10:00 at night. But as you got closer and closer to Christmas, they'd stay until 4 or 5 in the morning practicing these songs.

As for the songs themselves, Niedenthal was impressed by the fact that the lyrics were secondary in the sense that they were developed, in some cases, weeks after the melody lines had already been practiced by the choirs:

> They would do Do-Re-Mi and they would have the notes of the song on a big piece of cardboard with crayons that they got from the school. And you would have a guy; they'd go so far and go the whole way through the song's notes. So, they learn all the notes first, and that went on for weeks, no words. And then […] they'd also make up their own dances. So, on Christmas Day, you'd have one side of the island come in. You'd have your reverend up there and they'd do all the songs, and they do their dances, and then the other side would come in. They do all their songs and all their dances. And then the reverend would decide who is the best. So, it was very competitive, but, really nice. They do it to this day.

While not being religious himself, he enjoys attending the church services 'just to hear people sing, and it's very soothing' and feels that the songs sung at church constitute an outlet for people's hardship as life in the atolls without urban infrastructure

> wasn't easy for me. It's not easy for anybody living on that island, for a stranger to go in there and there's no airplane. You're getting a boat every five months [and you're] running out of everything after a couple of months after the boat leaves. It's a hard life. And people, when they go in and they sing on a Sunday, they're getting a lot out, you know, the hard life they're living and everything
>
> (Jack Niedenthal 2024, personal communication).

From his perspective, sound occupies a special place in Marshallese everyday life as an essential quality of 'their culture and their religion and singing, […] it's always been important to them that release that the music gave them and the songs' (Jack Niedenthal 2024, personal communication). Daniel Kramer,

CEO of the construction company PII, avid music enthusiast, radio station owner and event organiser, emphasises the importance of Marshallese songs and chants for the transmission of knowledge:

> we don't have any written language, you know, we're talking way back. We don't have any written language […] we're living in an environment where institutional knowledge was only passed down through word-of-mouth, chants and music. So, when we say, when Marshallese say music is a big part of our life; I mean, it is […] why the part of how culture, our culture, has been able to continue over centuries. It's really ingrained in us and that's done through chants and music. So, […] if you listen to the old, old songs, every single song has a purpose. It could be about fishing. It could be about how to predict the weather […] it's knowledge, you know, knowledge and history. And then you bring it to more contemporary times, and it's more about love [laughs]. And, you know, things like that. Way different than what it used to be. So, the lyrics now have lesser meaning and depth than older Marshallese music
> (Daniel Kramer 2024, personal communication).

Some church services seek to bridge the worlds of Popular Music with its longstanding Marshallese cultural history. For example, they mix ancient Marshallese storytelling with hip-hop beats to make the information more attractive for young listeners unfamiliar with older Marshallese words and expressions. Ronald Jorthan, who participated as a teenager in several church services where such hip-hop tracks were played, remembers that they mainly left him confused:

> Marshallese music and the hip hop is always so tricky for me. Like, I even try to like understand what it means. But it seems like those words were ancient language. Like, I never even heard of before. I never even heard someone say it in person because it was so odd. But it was more, I don't know, it's like how you're listening to a monk doing a Buddhist [chant]. That's how you're listening [to] it, but don't understand what it means.

For him, listening to this type of church-sanctioned hip-hop is not different from listening to ancient Marshallese chants as he thinks that no one is now using ancient language. His

> grandparents knew a little bit, but they're even trying to like force us to learn about it. 'Cause I mean, like, why not just put in a text so that others can see it. Instead of letting us know about it, I don't mean, like, I don't like it, I just don't like, usually use it with my friends. 'Cause old people like to, you know, understand the meaning of it, how they're living in their own lives, how their life's changing nowadays 'cause they need to remember what they came from, because they need to listen to

> that old music, the old ancient songs. That's how I knew about it when I was, like 16. I was like: "Oh, so that's how my grandparents always tell me to go every Sunday just to listen to the ancient Marshallese songs with hip hop!"
>
> (Ronald Jorthan 2024, personal communication).

During *Kūrijṃōj*, I experienced a comparable eclectic mixture of Marshallese traditional tales, values and spirituality with present technologies and Popular Music. This was especially evident when I attended Rairōk Full Gospel Church on Christmas Day for the mass and *jebta* celebration. The church is located directly next to Lagoon Road, and its main entrance faces Bingo Store, a mom-and-pop shop located just on the other side of the street. The church complex also features a west wing surrounded by trees that form a green barrier. To the east, there is an open space between the side of the church and the next lot, with a few benches and palm trees providing limited shade. On a regular weekday, cars sonically dominate the surrounding space and especially during the afternoon peak hours, traffic is noisy when taxis, lorries and school buses travel between Rairōk, the airport and the business districts in the east. Rairōk Full Gospel Church is flanked by liminal space on three sides: to the north by Lagoon Road, to the east by the open lot which extends towards the south until it leads into residential lots located on the ocean side (Figure 4.2).

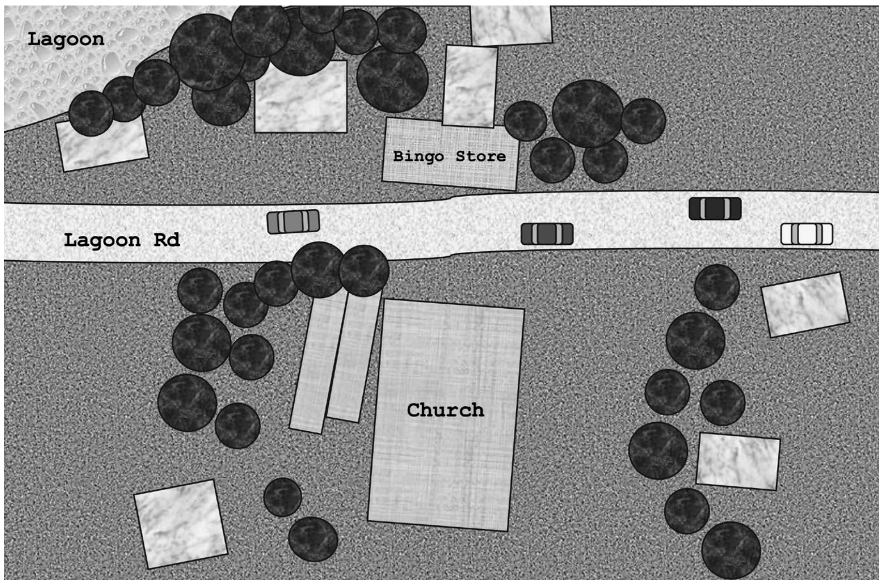

Figure 4.2 Approximation of Rairōk Full Gospel Church and its surrounding area on a weekday.

Like many churches in the Marshall Islands, the building is sonically connected to its surrounding area, as it has no glass windows but fly screens to allow for sufficient ventilation inside. Sounds inside the church can, therefore, easily reach the surrounding area outside the walls, especially once groups sing or a public address (PA) system is used. The latter was clearly audible one night, a few days before Christmas, while I was driving past the building in a taxi with rolled-down windows. A group of children were inside the lit-up church, gathering around a man holding a microphone. In passing, we heard a loud 'shut up!' emanating from the PA inside the building. Indeed, as Jack Niedenthal's account illustrates, the *jebta* mark not only the celebratory high point of the *Kūrijṃōj* period, but there is also a representative and playfully competitive character in it which can induce stress after countless of hours of rehearsing songs and choreographies (see Schwartz 2021: 177–80).

The morning mass on Christmas Day began around 10 am and lasted for three hours until lunch time. The large church space was equipped with white plastic chairs arranged in rows (Figure 4.3) and the mass was held entirely in Marshallese which meant that I was only able to pick up partial aspects of the sermons, songs and prayers. From what I understood, however, it was obvious that the mass emphasised togetherness and a strong sense of community. Songs accompanied by a band consisting of a singer and keyboardist as well as an electric bass and guitar player, were integral to the church service. After about three hours of singing and prayer, the priest asked the first row of parishioners to stand up and weave through the rear rows in a serpentine pattern towards the back and personally greet every member of the congregation with a handshake. By the end of the mass, all the participants in the service had welcomed each other and wished a merry Christmas.

I returned after a brief lunch break to catch the beginning of the *jebta*. These performances are not in need of an elevated stage separated from the audience room, although the church hall does feature a stage on which the band was playing. Once the *jebta* commenced, the neat rows of chairs that afford a quiet sitting and listening were removed and pushed to the walls of the room to make enough space for the choreographies, singers and spectators that occasionally weaved through the dancers to pick up sweets scattered about or even playfully mock parts of the dances. Each performance follows the same sequence: A uniformly dressed group of around 50 participants gather outside the church entrance and wait for their cue from the musicians on the other side of the hall and their dance leader. Like the church services, the *jebta* are accompanied by live music consisting of singers, keyboard, electric guitar and bass. Complex connections between present music styles like island beat and reggae and significant Marshallese lore are also exemplified in the *jebta*. For example, songs allude to myths, life lessons and expressions of Marshallese identity (Schwartz 2015: 798) while dances symbolise practices such as fishing and seafaring manoeuvrers.

Once the music starts, the dance leader guides the group into the building, commencing the first part of the performance. The leader functions as

Figure 4.3 Chair arrangement for the mass on Christmas Day.

a sort of drill instructor who always keeps a whistle between his lips that he makes ample use of to sonically correct dance moves and alignment over the high volume of the music. Throughout the dance, the entire group slowly parades into the hall while following complex sets of choreography that at times are synced to the lyrics of the song that is being sung, symbolising fishing, sailing, harvesting, fights, play and other aspects of Marshallese everyday life. The entire dance lasts around twenty minutes during which the leader ensures through occasional waving, pointing and whistle trills that the choreography stays in sync. Once every performer has entered the hall, the leader arranges them into a compact choir group formation (Figure 4.4). *Jebta* groups using varying strategies to achieve this, for example, by integrating the back rows

Figure 4.4 A *jebta* transitioning from the dance to the choir formation. The leader outside the line on the left reviews the alignment.

from the left and right side in a manoeuvre similar to a zipper merge. Once the choir is assembled, the second part of the performance begins which is sung by the group while the dance leader conducts. An entire *jebta* lasts between thirty and forty minutes, depending on aspects like the tempo of the music, dance and number of choir songs being performed.

Figure 4.5 outlines how *ainikien* reshapes the liminal space surrounding the church during the *jebta*. The large circle circumscribes the area in which the participants moved around during the event and the radius in which the sound

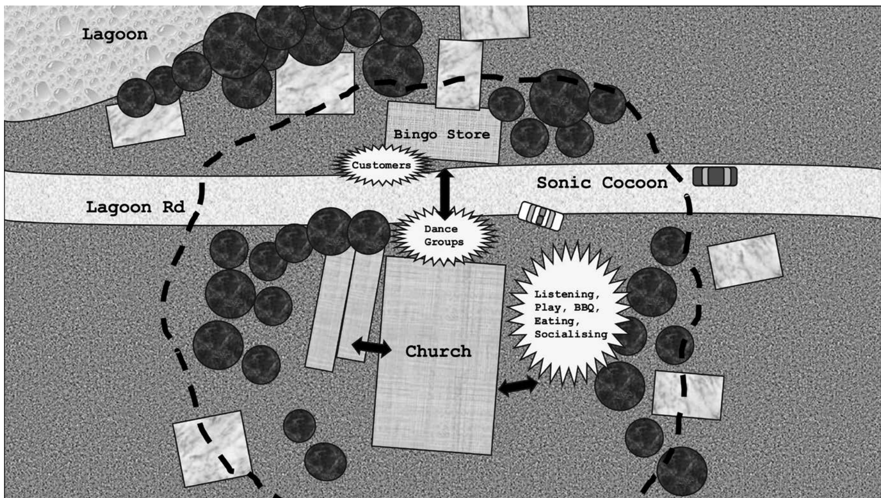

Figure 4.5 Rairōk Full Gospel Church and surrounding area on Christmas Day during the *jebta*.

Figure 4.6 People enjoying the *jebta* outside of the church.

of the *jebta* was clearly audible. The double-sided arrows indicate the areas that most of the movement inside and outside the building was taking place in: near the front door, where groups prepared and commenced their performances, on the western side towards the adjacent church building where food was prepared and on the eastern side leading to the liminal space between the church and the neighbouring lots where the picnic benches are located. The star-shaped areas mark the most-frequented locations where most people congregated outside of the building. For example, the liminal space to the east was used by people who arranged the white plastic chairs to listen to the performances at a lower volume from the outside while also being able to converse, eat and drink (Figure 4.6). The open windows are essential material components in this dynamic as they afford to choose how to experience the performance. It is possible to either engage with the visual qualities of the performance such as the colourful attire and LED jewellery while listening to the music on the inside at full volume or by looking through a window from the outside at a lower volume. It is also possible to find a spot in the surrounding area from where just the music is audible at an even lower volume.

Through its layers of *ainikien*, the *jebta* liquefies the boundaries between the inside and outside of the church. In other words, *jebta* equally takes place outside of the church as they do inside. The dancers already begin their choreography in front of the building while congregating in the area between its entrance and Lagoon Road. Especially large groups with 50 or more participants occupy parts of the road when beginning their formation, which required after the nightfall that a police patrol regulated traffic passing through the area. As the dancers slowly enter, they playfully appropriate the liminal space between the inside of the hall, its entrance and Lagoon Road for about a third of the duration of the entire performance.

Usually, Lagoon Road functions as a connecting path throughout the atoll by affording the mobility of vehicles and the crossing of the road. The latter is regulated in the form of constraining affordances exemplified through

speed bumps and police traffic control. Lagoon road is part of the liminal space surrounding Rairōk Full Gospel Church as it features unpaved sidewalks and patches of grass. I consider traffic noise in line with Gascia Ouzounian, who argues that rough divisions between sound and noise 'cannot account for the variety of sounds that characterize modern life. Nor are such divisions necessarily helpful in appreciating the wider ecological and sociocultural systems within which sounds operate' (Ouzounian 2017: 9). The sonic ebbs and flows of traffic indicate a functional urban environment which at the same time does not implicate that such sounds should be celebrated. Rather, 'traffic sounds in and of themselves do not possess positive or negative attributes; they are only meaningful in relation to the particular environmental, social, cultural, political, and economic contexts in which they are heard' (Ouzounian 2017: 9). Spatial liminality in the area surrounding Rairōk Full Gospel Church is also represented through the sound of waves, as the road is in sections directly leading past the ocean and the lagoon. The liminal space is principally characterised by intersecting affordances (Figure 4.7), as its location in front of a store and directly next to Lagoon Road sees a continuous intersection of different uses throughout both a regular day and during the *jebta*. In this sense, the liminal characteristic of the area does not entirely change during the celebration as the road is not completely blocked for traffic. Nevertheless, the dances, celebration and music playfully appropriate the entire surrounding area of the church, including the road as well as the area in front of Bingo Store. Lagoon Road serves here as a flat and even pathway that can be crossed to get to the stores as well as it affords being danced on. The music emanating from the inside of the church reaches this area as do the claps, cheers and chants of dancers as they begin their choreography in front of the church. Despite these aspects indicating the

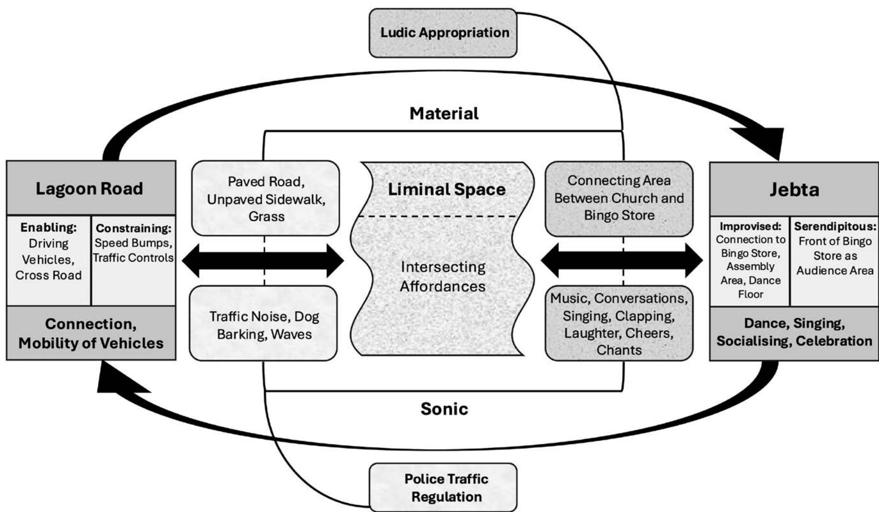

Figure 4.7 SMAC illustrating the *jebta* at Rairōk Full Gospel Church.

use of the area's improvised affordances, there is also serendipitous dynamics to be noted. In front of the Bingo Store are tables and chairs that customers use to enjoy food and drinks. As the *jebta* occupy the area in front of the church and parts of the street, serendipitous affordances turn this eating area into an extended audience space for the first portion of the dances. The road's intended affordance of serving as a central path for mobility are temporarily overthrown and replaced with the improvised affordance for congregation, music and dance as participants of the celebration began their entrance into the church and people crossed the road to replenish at Bingo Store. Transgressing architectural boundaries through *ainikien*, *jebta* are a multi-sensorial experience, while the combination of music, performance and celebration sonically re-enforce the temporary appropriation of the church's surrounding area through a sonic cocoon. *Ainikien*, as a phenomenon transgressing the boundaries between the outside and the inside of the church, was also illustrated by an incident that occurred in the later hours of the celebration.

Around 11 pm, while the celebration was well underway, a speaker to the right of the front entrance pointing outside, suddenly emitted a loud ground hum that almost entirely drowned out the music. Most dancers, seconds before still in sync with each other and the music (Figure 4.8), were startled and ceased to dance while some immediately covered their ears with their hands and pushed inside the church to leave the parameter of the noise as quickly as possible (Figure 4.9). People in the surrounding area were also driven away by the noise, moving to the side of the church or across the road to the Bingo Store. The event illustrates how *ainikien* can break a sonic cocoon, creating a celebratory space in front of the church in one moment and then becoming unbearable and pushing people out of its parameter in the next. Jessica Schwartz mentions that the rehearsals for the celebration of Gospel Day can also reach significant volumes as 'Yamaha accompaniments became fuzzed out and distorted when they were blared through speakers at the maxed-out volume, while songfest groups sang even louder to compensate for any additional noise, projecting their voices' (Schwartz 2021: 177). While the volume of Marshallese worship and spirituality occasionally results in noise complaints in the Marshallese diasporas living in the continental United States (Schwartz 2021: 177), it more so contributes to the temporary take-over of the urban atoll's enabling and constraining affordances.

The mixing and layering of *ainikien* was also audible during the Christmas Eve service at the Catholic Cathedral of the Assumption in Wūlka. I arrived about 15 minutes before the service was about to commence and found the church hall to be occupied up to the last seat. Not wanting to stand at the entrance and potentially block the way, I settled on sitting just outside of the church on a bench in the front yard next to Lagoon Road. After the service had begun, late arriving parishioners gathered around the entrance, arranging white plastic chairs there and next to the open windows while the ensuing sermons, prayers and songs like Gloria in excelsis Deo extended the service beyond the church walls. The mix of *ainikien* that reached my ears at

Figure 4.8 and 4.9 above: Members of a *jebta* dancing synchronised while entering the church. Top on next page: Seconds later, the sudden noise from the speaker disrupts the synchronisation. Note the two dancers covering their ears. *(Continued)*

the outskirt of the garden, however, were not in harmony with each other but a cacophony in which the sonic traces of occidental spirituality and the sounds of traffic behind me created complex sonic layers. Not only the sermon and songs were punctuated by the sound of evening traffic, which, even on Christmas Eve featured surprisingly many utility vehicles and lorries roaring past the church. Adding to the sonic mix were also little plastic music boxes as part of the garden's decoration that whined high pitched versions of Christmas carols

Figure 4.8 and 4.9 (Continued)

through chirpy piezoelectric speakers. Another event that demonstrated the complex mix of *ainikien* is the block party organised for New Year's Eve. In 2023, a section of Lagoon Road was blocked for the event around the court, Alele Museum, Wūlka Pier and traffic was diverted around the area through Wūlka Back Road on the ocean side. The parking lot in front of the Robert Reimers hotel hosted a night market with food and drinks and the streets were illuminated by pedestrians wearing LED headwear and earrings which the Cost Price supermarket in the area sold on tables in front of their store. Many of the LED headpieces had the shape of bunny ears; it is likely that they were imported leftovers from the previous year's celebration in East Asia as 2023 was the year of the bunny according to the Chinese zodiac. The largest stage featured DJ sets with North American R&B and hip-hop, while

Figure 4.10 Live music on the stage left while people dance on Lagoon Road in the rain. Note the two men holding flashlights.

the other two focused on island beat styles influenced by reggae and other Caribbean music. Like the bands performing during the *jebta*, live music was performed with keyboards, bass, guitar and vocals. About 40 minutes before 12 am, the music paused and one of the stages hosted a transmission of the Nitijela's New Year's address on a TV on the sidewalk. Seconds before the clocks struck 12, rain began to pour as people cheered and women threw sweets into the air and the band on the stage next behind the TV set commenced their up-tempo rendition of 'happy, happy new year'. The groups of visitors that previously had gathered in front of the screen and quietly listened to the New Year's announcement dispersed laughingly, seeking shelter under tents and the awnings of storefronts. Others were not bothered by the rain whatsoever, dancing, clapping and cheering along with the music while the rain was drumming on the corrugated iron sheet roofs of the surrounding buildings. An impromptu dance floor quickly formed on Lagoon Road in front of the stage (Figure 4.10), supported by two men holding flashlights overhead to illuminate the area where a group of about a dozen people were dancing.

SMAC frames the sono-material dynamics of this event (Figure 4.11). Throughout the year, the area surrounding Lagoon Road is primarily characterised by enabling and constraining affordances that regulate traffic and access to the supermarkets, shops and the piers from which vessels launch to other islands in Mājro such as Āne-m̧anōt (Enemanot) and Āne-ko (Eneko) as well as other atolls like Arņo. The paved road, driveways, sidewalks, loading zones and docks shape a liminal space of intersecting, enabling and constraining affordances represented in the dominant *ainikien* of traffic and labour. Improvised affordances remain unused for most of the year until the area is blocked

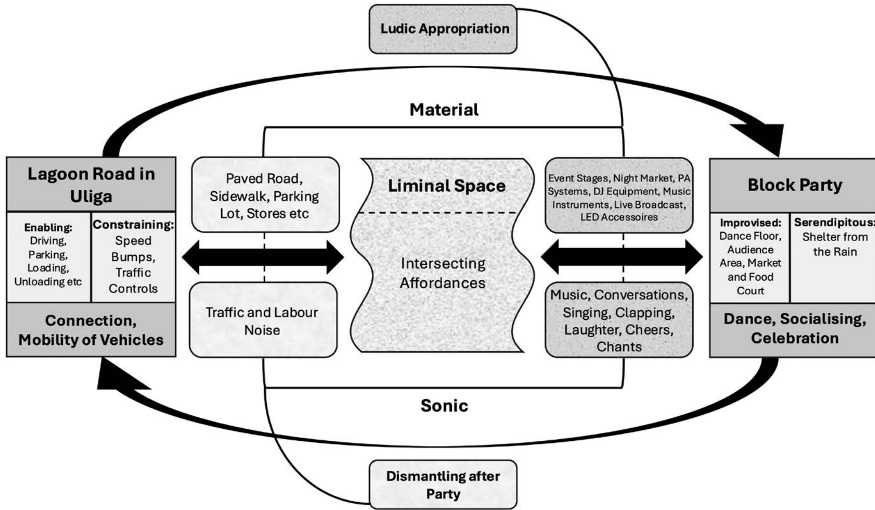

Figure 4.11 SMAC for the Block Party in Wūlka.

off from traffic and set up for the block party. The event stages, night market and equipment that facilitate the live performance of music facilitate several layers of overlapping sonic cocoons, characterised by the curation of DJ sets and live music performances. The dynamic is comparable to the impromptu appropriation of Lagoon Road during the *jebta* at Rairōk Full Gospel Church, albeit in the case of the block party, it is facilitated not through traffic regulation but a complete diversion of traffic: attendees can use the street's improvised affordances for dancing, gathering as audiences in front of the stages and walk around the night market without having to watch out for cars. The live music and DJ sets performed on the stages as well as the broadcast of the New Year's address characterise the ludic appropriation of the area through various overlapping sonic cocoons created through the PA systems and *ainikien* (voices) of the guests. This form of sanctioned ludic appropriation is then returned to the quotidian function of the era once the market and stages are dismantled and traffic accesses Lagoon Road again.

Kūrijṃōj, shaped through the Christmas parade, the *jebta* and the block party on New Year's Eve, epitomise the ludic appropriation of Lagoon Road as 'a site for musical expressions, and the location for noises to congeal into cultural form' (LaBelle 2010: 130). Marshallese festivities that use the street's improvised affordances turn it into 'an acoustical instrument for the propagation and diffusion of multiple sonorities, which the city itself comes to feedback' (LaBelle 2010: 130). Indeed, *Kūrijṃōj*, the most important festivities of the year do not take place on Mājro's lagoon but on Lagoon Road as an opportunity for the atoll's communities to celebrate not only the birth of Christ but also their own *ṃōṇōṇōū*.

4.2 Asphalt Dilep: Wave Pilots of the Urban Atoll

Since the end of WWII, Mājro has become a car-dependent society. Jack Niedenthal notes that there were few cars on the atoll in the 1980s. He remembers a befriended *irooj* (chief, clan leader) who bought a new minivan and took him for a drive once it had arrived:

> We drove down the street. He was just like, you know, driving this minivan like he was driving a Cadillac or a BMW or a Mercedes or whatever. It was just like, you know: "Look at my car!" You know, because there weren't that many cars.

Nowadays, however, Niedenthal finds the number of new cars on the road outstanding, while he also cannot understand how locals are financing them:

> Those pickup trucks are $60,000 trucks. I can't even imagine ever buying anything like that. But they get it through their jobs a lot of times. And you know, there's people that know how to get away with taking money. Yeah, but the cars is overwhelming. Now, that wasn't like that before
> (Jack Niedenthal 2024, personal communication).

This influx of cars is ironic considering that the Marshall Islands have been politically pledging for a reduction of CO_2 emissions by 32% below the 2010 level by 2025 to reach net zero emissions by 2050 (Saddington 2015). This influx of cars has reshaped the sonic characteristics of the atoll. Indeed, the *ainikien* of traffic is omnipresent and when I asked locals what their favourite place is, they frequently named non-urban islands in Mājro or other atolls as well as the beach at Lora on the opposite end of Mājro's business district. A point of departure for untangling the mixing of vibratory labour that structures Mājro's everyday life poses Lefebvre's assertion that 'where there is interaction between a place, a time and an expenditure of energy, there is rhythm' (Lefebvre 2013: 25), indicating that an analysis of rhythm can 'ride with the movements in whichever work or whichever sequence of actions until their end' (Lefebvre 2013: 25). In Mājro, this can be achieved by comparing the flow of traffic throughout a week's cycle. Sunday contrasts the weekdays as traffic becomes remarkably quiet. Lefebvre argues that 'to grasp a rhythm it is necessary to have been grasped by it; one must let oneself go, give oneself over, abandon oneself to its duration' (Lefebvre 2013: 37). To grasp rhythm as non-monotonous and intersected by subtle and slight variations, I engaged with Lagoon Road in different modes, as a pedestrian, as a taxi passenger, as a driver on varying days and times as well as a participant in several *Kūrijṃōj* events. This participatory engagement with the busiest road in the Marshall Islands facilitated a first-hand experience of enabling, constraining, improvised and serendipitous affordances and the shifting rhythms of traffic. Three general qualities characterise the different modes of engagement with Lagoon

Road. First, travelling as a pedestrian in Mājro is the most limiting form of mobility. It is also not advisable for non-locals outside of the business district due to potential of being attacked by aggressive dogs that roam freely in the residential areas. Second, being a passenger in a taxi is a communal experience, often mediated through the *ainikien* of *m̧ōm̧awi* (informal adult conversations) between passengers and the taxi drivers as well as music playing through the car stereo and radio broadcasts. Third, interacting with Lagoon Road as a driver affords the most freedom, underpinning the implemented North American urban design has been implemented in Mājro during its development as an urban atoll after WWII. The road, nevertheless, is not a separate entity from the surrounding bodies of water but exposed to the rhythms of the tides. This interconnectedness of the urban rhythms of the atoll with the conditions of the sea is highlighted in Lefebvre's claim that rhythms can principally be grasped when paying attention to how each wave as accumulated 'frequency, amplitude and displaced energy' (Lefebvre 2013: 88) changes perpetually as it reaches a shore, carrying ripples in its path.

The unique wave patterns of each atoll are the subject of Marshallese seafaring wisdom and essential for wave piloting as the Marshallese form of sea navigation (Langlois 2016). While Marshallese navigators orientate themselves between atolls, they do not rely on concepts of moving islands such as in the Carolinian technique of *etak*, but they sense the rhythms of wave patterns with their body in correspondence with the rocking motion of the canoe in the sea space (Genz 2008: 156–57). A central concept within Marshallese seafaring is *dilep* (backbone) (Genz 2008: 155) that is understood as the specific wave patterns that form between any two islands or atolls. Sailing west from Mājro, for example, Marshallese wave pilots can detect *dilep* that lead to atolls reaching as far as Epoon (Ebon) and Roñļap (Rongelap) at the outskirts of the nation (Genz 2008: 155). Despite functioning as a direct pathway forming what can be described as a straight line, the *dilep* is characterised by a *booj* (knot) (Genz 2008: 157), a complex nexus of opposing, accumulating and reciprocally cancelling wave frequencies. Lefebvre, likely unaware of the concept of *dilep*, acknowledges the intricacies that waves display as they either 'disrupt one another noisily' or create small ripples 'absorbing, fading, rather than crashing, into one another' (Lefebvre 2013: 88). Noteworthy is also Lefebvre's acknowledgement of cyclical rhythms being perceived as rooted in nature and therefore preferred by humans, whether it is 'the waves of the sea – a nice image, full of meaning – or sound waves, or circadian or monthly cycles' (Lefebvre 2013: 85). This cyclical understanding of time in Lefebvre's rhythmanalysis is strikingly congruent with what Hau'ofa (2000) and Diaz (2018) describe as cyclical ecological time in indigenous Oceanic temporality. The succession of the seasons, for example, is indicated by cyclical appearances of flora and fauna which motivate recurring human activities, rituals and festivities (Hau'ofa 2000: 461). Lefebvre states that these cyclical occurrences in nature and their related human practices 'punctuate everydayness' (Lefebvre 2013: 100) without ever completely

interrupting it. An analysis of such cyclical rhythm layers can uncover not only social relationships between individuals and groups but also between humans and their bodies as well as their identity in relationship to their surroundings, place and space (Lefebvre 2013: 101). On the flipside, the removal of people from their ancestral lands or their devastation through profit interest, war, and dispossession is the 'destruction of age-old rhythms of cyclical dramas that lock together familiar time, motion, and space' (Hau'ofa 2000: 469). In the words of the Marshallese people in their appeal to the United Nations after the detonation of the Castle Bravo nuclear bomb at Pikinni atoll in 1954: 'Land means a great deal to the Marshallese. It means more than just a place where you can plant your food crops or build your houses; or a place where you can bury your dead. It is the very life of the people. Take away their land and their spirits go also' (The Marshallese people 1954: 2). Lefebvre contrasts the perception of circular time with that of the linear being perceived as 'monotonous, tiring and even intolerable' (Lefebvre 2013: 85) aligning with Hau'ofa's perception of modern society as 'disengaging itself from natural cycles, which, as we shall see, is the major factor for the global environmental degradation' (Hau'ofa 2000: 461). Circular and linear rhythms intersect in Mājro, creating layers of *ainikien* that animate Lagoon Road and its adjacent side streets with the linear indicating the daily routines and cyclical patterns manifest social connection and the opportunity for establishing places of *ṃōṇōṇōū*. Marshallese mobility intersects the linear patterns of movement via the direct paths of *dilep* and the cyclical elements of seasons, tides and the social customs and knowledge tradition associated with them (Genz 2008, 2011). Alexander Spoehr describes how longer distances in Mājro were travelled by *wa* in the 1940s, the Marshallese outrigger canoes (Canoes of the Marshall Islands - Waan Aelõñ in Majel n.d.). Travelling across the lagoon by *wa*, he perceives the destination as only a spot on the horizon 'for it is impossible to see the length of the atoll' while 'those who know the atoll well can measure the progress of their craft by noting the familiar islands along the sides of the atoll, as the boat passes abreast of them, and one by one leaves them astern'(Spoehr 1966: 45). Once the *wa* approaches its destination, the 'tillerman softly starts a Marshallese song as he sees the land ahead, and one by one the crew members join in' (Spoehr 1966: 45). Although Spoehr's description of the tillerman's song makes it appear almost incidental, *alin ṃur*, steering songs are deeply rooted within Marshallese seafaring (Genz 2008, 2018). Despite the frequent *wa* traffic at the time, Spoehr counts more than 50 canoes on a busy day (Spoehr 1966: 64), he describes Lora as an isolated plot of land 'bounded by water or reef on all sides, except at the point where it is connected to the string-like remainder of Majuro Island' (Spoehr 1966: 62). Contact 'is maintained primarily by canoe' (Spoehr 1966: 59) substantiating the function of the lagoon as an 'avenue of communication with and transportation to other parts of the atoll' (Spoehr 1966: 64). Spoehr's observations highlight that water facilitated the principal mode of mobility while the road was merely a 'supplementary feature' (Spoehr 1966:

64) of the settlements in the early post-war years. According to him, there were in the 1940s 'only a few wheeled vehicles at the village' consisting of 'two or three bicycles and a few light, two-wheeled handcarts—dating from the Japanese era and well adapted to the village road system' (Spoehr 1966: 50). Within a few decades, mobility in Mājro has changed from the waters of the lagoon to the land through artificial paths and land connections of islands. While Spoehr (1966: 48) previously described an unpaved path consisting of 'clean-swept coral sand' intersected by 'up-ended coral rock slabs', Lagoon Road is now in most sections asphalted and of a more rigid quality when compared, for example, to the neighbouring atoll Tarawa in the nation of Kiribati. Although Lagoon Road is intersected by potholes in some sections, especially in areas where the UV and ocean breeze corrodes the bitumen, Tarawa's road is in comparison eroded to the point that the locals have adapted to it by commuting preferably on motorcycles instead of cars. Hearing or seeing a motorcycle or bicycle in Mājro in comparison is rare. The few bicycles that can be seen on the road are mostly distributed to the missionaries of the Mormon LDS Church. Lagoon Road as a composite of paved bitumen and compacted coral constitutes a breeding ground for the substantial increase of combustion engine vehicles. The focus on Lagoon Road as a mobility replacement for the lagoon has, in this sense, followed the American 'promise of the city – as a place of work and creativity, anonymity and sociability, structure and adventure, history and progress, now liberated by the driving's propensity for communication, discovery and speed' (Borden 2013: 17). The street, despite being often viewed as an embodiment of public life, is for most of the day occupied by motorised vehicles and thus 'more a functioning obstacle to such collective democratic concentration' while operating according to 'its own particular behavior, rhythm, and expression contoured and choreographed by the automobile' (LaBelle 2010: 130). At the same time, the road, as a connector with the dynamics of globalisation (Hess 2004; Kupferman 2011), carries the promise of ongoing motion epitomised in the liberal utopian dream of the *open road* and indeed, the majority of Mājro's inhabitants spends its waking hours on asphalt and gravel rather than on water. As there are no traffic lights in Mājro, vehicle speed is regulated with speed bumps in various locations of Lagoon Road that not only slow down the rhythm of the traffic to a walking pace but also give the opportunity for drivers, passengers and pedestrians to socialise (Figure 4.12).

For taxi drivers as the most frequent navigators of Lagoon Road, speed bumps can be interpreted as the *dilep* of the urban atoll in the sense that they do not rock the vessel from side to side but pitch it forward towards its destination (Genz 2008:158). Indeed, the bouncing of vehicles across Lagoon Road structures the rhythm of traffic and once a few times driven back and forth. I found myself remembering the location of speed bumps from memory as they functioned as orientation pointers structuring sections of the road. After a few days, I knew instinctively where to speed down and how many speed bumps separated the drive to the supermarket or other locations. Interestingly,

Figure 4.12 Traffic passing over a speedbump at Iakwe Katoj Park.

not all speed-regulating bumps on Lagoon Road are intentionally created. Some consist in the strong roots of trees warping the road, which is most pronounced leading up to the beach in Lora.

Nevertheless, this urbanisation and shift towards petrol-based land mobility instead of wind-based marine mobility has come with a steep price (Figure 4.13). The cost of fuel in the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) is high due to import and transportation prices (Government of the Republic of the Marshall Islands 2018: 47) while *wa* have become a rare sight on the lagoon (see Hess 2004: 187). If available at all, they fulfil a culturally and symbolic role as part of the educational institution *Waan Aelõñ in Majel* (Canoes of the Marshall Islands - WAM) (Figure 4.14) and during festivities and sailing championships (Canoes of the Marshall Islands - Waan Aelõñ in Majel n.d.).

During a visit to Arņo, Jim Hess notes that the 'elegant canoes have been replaced by fiberglass and aluminium, or local boats made of imported marine plywood which does not demand the specialist skills of a canoe builder' (Hess 2004: 190). The boats that now deliver goods from Mājro are powered by motors manufactured by brands such as Yamaha or Honda while landing strips on both sides of the atoll facilitate the import of air cargo from Mājro (Hess 2004: 190). Districts closers to Mājro have a quicker rhythm of items being restocked by the daily boats arriving, while the ones located on the far side of Arņo must await the arrival of the 'bumbum', a boat named after the sound of its diesel engine (Hess 2004: 189). The vibratory labour of the 'bum bum' structuring the rhythm of goods arriving is likely based on the fact that it is heard before seen, a phenomenon that I also experienced several times at docks in Mājro. In other words, in the urban atoll, the launching of the canoe (see Ingersoll 2016: 188), as an expression of spiritual connection with the land and sea, is challenged by the mundane act of firing up a combustion engine, no matter whether it is attached to a vessel or stuck inside a wheeled vehicle.

Figure 4.13 and 4.14 top: Queuing evening traffic in 2024. Bottom: A *wa* at WAM.

4.3 Mobile Sonic Cocoons

On Christmas Eve 2023, I chatted with a taxi driver about his Christmas plans, and he revealed that he would 'spend Christmas on the road' so that he could make some extra money to take his family on a weekend trip to Āne-ko island before the new year. For taxi drivers, Lagoon Road holds a significance comparable to other car-based societies: the road is not only a facilitator for breadwinning but also as an opportunity for practicing self-determination behind the steering wheel. For Labelle, the '"highway" or "freeway" is quite literally a space for itinerant production' (LaBelle 2010: 131). Indeed, most residents and visitors experience mobility in Mājro as passengers in one of

the numerous taxis that frequent Lagoon Road (see Schwartz 2021: 41). Different to systems in other countries, taxis in Mājro are collectively used, serving in a sense as micro buses that pick up passengers along the way until they reach full capacity. When entering a taxi, one is often greeted by music playing across a range of different volumes, ranging from barely audible to festively loud. The music selection is more often than not local, either drawn from one of the radio stations (see Elbōn 2004) or recordings of local artists like Darlene Keju (Johnson 2013) or the Laura Settlers. *Alin ṃur*, the navigational songs of the *wa* tillerman, have been replaced with the occasional singing or humming of the taxi drivers reciting their favourite lyrics while piloting the concrete waves of Lagoon Road. The most apparent sonic difference between sea and road navigation is that the latter allows for taxi drivers to manipulate the sonic cocoon as a DJ, a practice that tillermen rarely engage in while exposed to the winds of the open water. In the traffic of the urban atoll, music acts as a structural element that 'gives the individual body temporal and material support, figuring as auditory scaffolding that grants structure to location, mood, or desire' (LaBelle 2010: 131). Through controlling the soundtrack of their urban road navigation, taxi drivers perform sonic sovereignty in their everyday life (see DeNora 2003: 17) while reframing, driving as a cultural and aesthetic experience (LaBelle 2010: 133). The car's vibration, as it moves along Lagoon Road in combination with the vibration of speakers and people's *bōro,* create a nexus of vibratory labour (LaBelle 2010) that partially reshapes urban space into a moving sonic cocoon in which the community shares information and re-enforces its culture and social coherence through music and impromptu sing-alongs. Local radio stations are essential components in this dynamic as they generate a hub through which Mājro's community stays connected through music with the Marshallese diasporas (see Elbōn 2004). Daniel Kramer, head of Power 103.5 FM, created the private radio station in 2017 as a 'platform, a voice where artists can bring their music and showcase it' as he found that the national radio station in Mājro was not supporting the music events he was organising at the time. Born out of a DIY spirit, Kramer found that

> the only other mostly listened-to radio station was the government radio station. And they played either music or the parliament, which polarized people. And all people could talk about was what they heard over the radio, which was arguments that were made in the parliament, and people were either on one side or the other. So, I was like: "We need a radio station to entertain, you know, purely for entertainment. [...] This is pre you know, everybody's got a phone and everything now, but that was the only sense of community, was the radio, and [...] you know, the people were arguing about stuff. So, I figured the radio station is sort of a community, it brings the community together, creates a sense of community.

The participatory aspect of the stations function is highlighted in the curation of its music as Kramer explains that

> we kind of play off of the audience and they call in; they message in and they tell us what they want us to play. I've always made it a point not to be politically correct, just go, you know, just go with the flow. So yeah, a lot of it is based on feedback as far as Marshallese music, especially when new Marshallese music is coming out. Folks pitch it to us, but we do have a standard on that music. I mean, if it looks like it was, you know, little to no effort in it, we tell them that, you know: "Thanks for submitting, but, you know, you got to get serious about your music." So, in a way, it's our way of kind of encouraging quality and stuff like that.

In terms of the connection that the music played on the station is creating between the community and the Marshallese living in the United States, Kramer noticed that it keeps people in the diaspora

> abreast of what people here are listening to and they also don't get the kind of music that we play overseas. So, you know, when I say our, you know, our audience makes our playlist, a lot of the most popular songs are regional songs, other Pacific Island songs, other styles of island music. Well, they don't get anything close to that in Arkansas or anywhere else.

This is especially apparent in the numerous calls and messages that the station and its hosts received from Marshallese overseas who inquire about song titles and artist names:

> They ask a lot about our playlists. "What song was this and what song was that?" Yeah, it's mostly inquiring. And then also, they listen to our playlist because they'll make dedications to friends and family, and they'll request a particular song that's on… I don't want to say exclusively on our playlist, but I'm sure they can't find it in any other playlist. So, they'll make [a] dedication and say: "Can you play that particular song?"
> (Daniel Kramer 2024, personal communication).

Comparable to the churches functioning as sonically permeable places, numerous cars on Lagoon Road drive with their windows rolled down so that the airstream and breeze can cool passengers inside. The sonic cocoon created through the music and conversations inside the cars as they are traversing the city, therefore, partially resonate with their surroundings, especially when drivers or passengers honk or call out names to greet people on the street while passing by. Driving on Lagoon Road is in this sense for most of the time a communal rather than a solitary experience which sharply offsets its liminality from the one displayed by highways and roads in continental contexts. This

was especially evident on New Year's Eve when on the way back from the block party, pedestrians on the side of the road would occasionally cheer a 'Happy New Year!' into the windows of passing cars. Another aspect that taxi drivers as navigators of the urban atoll share with tillermen is the chewing of betel nuts that either results in occasional opening of the door mid-drive to spit excess saliva on the road, or while in a vessel, blood-red betel nut clouds in the water. If the taxi's windows are rolled up, these short moments of the driver's door opening temporarily merge the sonic characteristics of Lagoon Road with the music playing inside the vehicle.

Nevertheless, the sensory merging of cars, the road, sound and music manifests not only in everyday life but also in the Marshallese production and reproduction of popular culture. LaBelle describes the car as a 'living room on wheels' (LaBelle 2010: 142) and indeed, several taxi drivers decorate their dashboards with colourful beach towels, LED lights and handcrafted charms and fans made from dried palm and Pandanus tree leaves, accentuating that passengers are not sitting inside a non-descript liminal mode of mobility but the driver's extension of their home where they spend most of their day. Batman or *Batmon* in Marshallese, for example, holds a special cultural relevance. The character appears in a feature film called '*Batmon* vs Majuro' from 2016 directed by Jack Niedenthal (Niedenthal, Wakefield, and Niedenthal 2016) as well as an advocate for energy efficiency in an educational film (Microwave Films of the Marshall Islands 2019). Batmon and his insignia can frequently be spotted on Lagoon Road, for example, in a mural on a shipping container in which he is depicted smashing large letters spelling the word 'DIABETES' surrounded by an explosion of fruits and vegetables (Figure 4.15).

Even Batmobiles are driving on Lagoon Road, as several cars are decorated with the bat-insignia (Figure 4.16). The adoption of Batmon expresses not only a tongue-in-cheek form of *wājepdikū*, Marshallese wit, given that Bruce Wayne's superpower is to be rich but also symbolises the community's creative engagement with the improvised affordances of Lagoon Road and the vehicles that frequent it.

SIX9TOO productions, the event and music production company operated by Daniel Kramer not only hosts events and concerts but also creates elaborate music videos for island reggae artists such as Jahboy and Sean Rii in which Mājro is regularly featured (SIX9TOO PRODUCTIONS 2024). Strikingly, the settings most prominently shown in these music videos are neither the lagoon nor the sea, but Lagoon Road and different types of vehicles that are driving on it. A video for the song 'loving life' by Jahboy, for example, consists mostly of shots taken inside or in front of two convertible Humvee military vehicles in full camouflage paint which are flanked by riders on motocross bikes (SIX9TOO PRODUCTIONS 2017). Not only stands the visual presentation of the bulky and harsh design of US military machinery in stark contrast to the relaxed and life affirming lyrics and upbeat timbre of the music, but the video also masks the fact that Humvees and motocross bikes

Figure 4.15 and 4.16 top: Batmon mural on a shipping container opposite of the Marshall Islands Resort. Bottom: Bat insignia on a car in Rairōk.

are strikingly noisy vehicles. Among the other seven music video productions hosted on the SIX9TOO YouTube channel, many feature the musicians and their entourage driving and performing in cars. The most-played video counting almost 300,000 views is produced for a song called 'Love Like the Islands' performed by Sammielz, Rosie Delmah, Jahboy and Zeah. It features the music performance taking place on a vessel on Mājro's lagoon (SIX9TOO PRODUCTIONS 2019) after the group of international musicians arrives from different regions of Micro-, Mela- and Polynesia at Mājro airport. The video shows the artists boarding a vessel with which they head to the island of Āne-m̧anōt, a vacation destination for getaways and recreation (yachtseal@hotmail.com 2014). Frequently featuring artists performing songs while driving in open convertible cars, the videos of SIX9TOO productions choose in most cases Lagoon Road over the atoll's lagoon as a backdrop for their

musical expressions. Another example illustrating the ludic appropriation of Lagoon Road are the parades taking place throughout the year that celebrate events ranging from Gospel Day (see Schwartz 2021) to the Marshall Islands High School graduation celebration (The Current - MIHS Student online Newspaper 2020). The latter was swiftly organised by the school's councillor, PTA officers, parents and the students after their regular graduation ceremony had been cancelled in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Almost all 197 graduates participated in the float parade which drove from Rita to the picnic area next to the airport's airstrip, carrying large portrait photos of the graduates on the vehicles. At the airport park, the 'parade was concluded with speeches and danced off. The party lasted till late night' (The Current - News n.d.).

I experienced an impromptu parade upon returning to Mājro by plane in early 2024 from a short trip to Kiribati. On the plane was Claret Taonang Chong Gum of the Rikpikareej clan, who placed for the Marshall Islands as the third runner up at the Miss Pacific Islands 2024 beauty pageant in Nauru (Anae 2024; Masvidal 2024). Once the aeroplane had touched down in Mājro and reached the terminal, 'firefighters gave the Nauru Airlines plane a water cannon honor' (The Marshall Islands Journal 2024) by spraying it with water. After greetings, congratulations and photos with representatives including the ambassadors to the Taiwanese and Australian embassies, the returned Miss Marshall Islands boarded the back of a lorrie for 'a many hour "rally" or parade through Mājro, with dozens of vehicles honking horns and carrying welcome signs, much to the delight of many hundreds of onlookers who lined the streets as Miss Marshall Islands welcome home parade passed by' (The Marshall Islands Journal 2024) (Figure 4.17). The appropriation

Figure 4.17 Miss Marshall Islands parade float after her return in early 2024.

of Lagoon Road for parades draws on its enabling and constraining affordances of facilitating and regulating traffic flow through a combination of an even paved road and traffic control through speed bumps placed in irregular intervals.

Lagoon Road is sonically dominated by traffic noise during the week, creating a liminal space of intersecting affordances. The improvised affordances of this space are appropriated during parades, when slow moving decorated floats frequent the road in convoys flanked by police cars that let their sirens wail. While the communities invest substantial effort to make the floats visually attractive and engage with people on the side of the road by throwing sweets, the floats also occupy the road sonically through speaker systems and at times even live music performed on the beds of lorries and utility vehicles. The mixing of the music and sirens create occasional cacophonies when floats drive close to each other. Through their sonic impact, parades also draw on the serendipitous affordances of Lagoon Road, as floats can disrupt the territories of stray dogs who perceive the large and noisy vehicles as intruders and chase after them on the road. What is more, the celebratory intervention of traffic is often followed by a queue of cars accumulating behind the parade, returning Lagoon Road to its quotidian function (Figure 4.18). Besides these parades that ludically appropriate Lagoon Road in extra-ordinary events, sonic agencies also manifest in the community's interconnectedness as traffic flows through Mājro's tarred lifeline. Passing by school buses temporarily enrich the surrounding area with the lively laughter and chatter of students who sometimes also wave and playfully make faces at passing pedestrians, further liquifying the trajectories of the mobile sonic cocoons. The sonic textures of

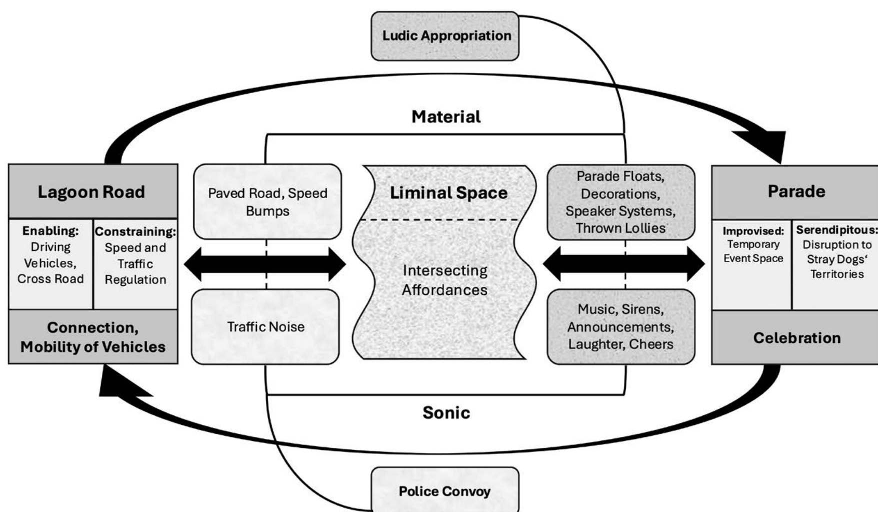

Figure 4.18 SMAC showcasing the ludic appropriation of Lagoon Road through float parades.

Mājro's traffic in which different layers of spaces overlap is therefore indicating vibratory labour, that, unlike its continental urban counterparts in cities such as Paris or New York, only rarely reaches the high-pitched growl and squeal that some vehicles emit when speeding up after a red light (Lefebvre 2013: 38–39). According to Lefebvre, the hard alternating rhythms of silence and bursts of noise are interrupted when for example a car stalls on the road and pedestrians reclaim the space, moving 'around them like waves around a rock' (Lefebvre 2013: 39). The interplay of pedestrians and vehicle traffic in Mājro, however, is not characterised in this staccato sense but rather a constant ebb and flow that reaches its peak during the morning commute to the work places in Mājro's business district and then again in the late afternoon once the school buses which drop students off in their neighbourhoods populate the roads with returnees from work. Like traversing the waves of the *dilep*, as a pedestrian, one has to not only look but also listen for the right gap in the waves of the vehicle traffic to cross the road. This affects the acoustic perception and understanding, that is, knowledge of the atoll that the residents of Mājro call their home. Whether it is the swoosh of the outrigger gliding through the textures of water on the lagoon or the rumble of car tyres on compacted coral roads, connection to land and sea are mediated through the vibratory labour renders Mājro not only urban but a home to its inhabitants.

Note

1 Some publications spell it as *jepta*. I continue to use here the spelling provided by the MOD (Marshallese-English Online Dictionary (MOD) 2022)

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Conclusion

A common question that I asked in conversations and interviews was: 'What sound represents the Marshall Islands for you?' Out of all the answers I received, the one that Ronald Jorthan gave stood out the most to me. He simply said without hesitation: 'An old lady crying.' I have been pondering on his words in the months since I left Mājro since his answer carries an emotional depth that I sincerely resonate with. Without a doubt, I must have looked surprised after he answered my question. Most people, up until this point, had used it as an opportunity to name their favourite Marshallese music or referred to sounds like the waves or specific animals like birds, geckos or crickets (see Section 2.1). He explained that hearing a woman cry is one of his earliest memories and finds that it 'makes people relate to their like, custom or how they're trying to, […] to be represented to the people before them, […] it's more of a traditional kind of way'. In terms of preserving a representational Marshallese sound, he noted that Marshallese people have different ways of singing which he likes to share 'so that other young kids and other generation would know how we're rebels and where we come from. So, that could be some like a symbol of how we're living as a Pacific Islanders'. That representational quality of a Marshallese woman's cry is connected to one of his earliest memories as,

> that was the one that I heard when I was just an infant because, I don't know why. Even though I was just like nine months old, I can recognize the sound, […] because there was the time when I came here on this island. Because I wasn't born here, I was born at Arizona, at city of Tucson and then years later, I just came here. And then that's when I first heard a lady crying, I was like, I just even, like, joined in. I guess, I don't know why. […] When I was a child, like, I never heard my mom crying. But then the first time I heard her, like, generally genuinely crying like I had to, like, [it] immediately triggered me that I had to cry as well. It was just like, I don't know, there's like this really deep connection I feel.

For him, this sound 'represents somewhat, how Marshallese women are born to be, you know, like our guardians. Like, that's how I always enjoy listening to that, so it's like a beacon.'

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Throughout this book, I have sought to represent the Marshallese everyday resilience through the beacons of *ainikien*. As both sound and the voice, I have highlighted *ainikien* as the vibratory labour of engaging with the materiality of Mājro's environment and the *bōro*, the throat as the seat of the soul, and the Marshallese fight for recognition, whether it is in the wake of nuclear silencing (Schwartz 2021) or the effects of climate change (Woodroofe 2018). With this, I emphasise that the liminal, being stuck in between spaces, times and situations (Thomassen 2016), serves as an entry point for understanding Marshallese lives in the present era, an era that I have outlined through the notion of the Anthropocene. While I have described only a fraction of the entanglements of people's lives in Mājro, I nevertheless argue that its structure, lying somewhere between the characteristics of a coral reef atoll and a continental city, represents the qualities and challenges that islands in the Anthropocene face. Mājro, as one of numerous urban centres in Micronesia, demonstrates in my view how liminality endows islands with powers and affordances (see Pugh and Chandler 2021: 191). While several studies have addressed or grazed this aspect as part of the ontological turn in Anthropology and sound studies (Bråten 2022; Kane 2015), this book seeks to present a perspective more aligned with the scope of sociologies of everyday life (Ghisleni 2017; Kalekin-Fishman 2013). Drawing on the notions of enabling, constraining, improvised and serendipitous affordances, I have traced how *ṃōṇōṇōū* in Mājro's everyday life as well as during its important festivities are shaped through *ainikien*. Highlighting the chromatic qualities of space (Duester, Holsgens, and O'Connor et al. 2025) is productive in this context, as it allows us to trace how qualities such as *ainikien* develop the force to turn the sensation of abstract urban space into places characterised by sociality and belonging. The lens of polluted leisure (Evers 2019) is a welcomed addition to the study of everyday life in the Anthropocene. While liminality is often implied in studies that investigate the qualities of blue, green and grey spaces (Cherrington and Black 2020; Evers 2023; O'Connor 2024), it is my hope that my conceptualisation of liminality as the sonic overlapping of grey, blue and green spaces helps to widen the analytical scope of chromatic leisure and wellbeing by highlighting the lives of people who are not living in the urban centres of continental and industrialised nations. Alternative epistemologies that broaden the analytical scope of academic investigation through inclusive sonic and urban practices such as skateboarding can only thrive within a balanced discourse in which people have the freedom to collaborate, discuss, disagree and propose unconventional ideas without the fear of becoming persona non gratae. Perhaps, an indicator of an academic field's health can be found in the number of co-authored publications that it produces, indicating that ideas are not conceived by isolated individuals but through the collaboration of different minds. I am aware of the blatant irony that my writing of these lines carries at the end of a single-authored monograph. There is no doubt that the perspective presented in this book is partial and is based on my perspective as an

Anglo-German outsider as part of a research project funded by the European Research Council. I have compiled it in the hope that it will inspire or perhaps infuriate (another form of inspiration) readers enough to seek out their own alternative epistemologies that can spark non-profit and other grassroots projects that support the wellbeing of indigenous lives. Chiefly, what I set out to achieve in writing this book is a sort of counter-narrative to the many academic publications that focus on the bombastic, the grant, the spectacular, chasing the dead-end phantasms of cultural purity. While I am not immune to brushing, such aspects of academic inquiry, this book is nonetheless a documentation of my attempt to demonstrate that some of the most enduring and resilient forms of happiness can be found in between the fleeting moments of everyday life, in the brief chat with a taxi driver rather than in the well-planned interview with a political leader. Considering the *ainikien* of a Marshallese woman crying as a beacon of Marshallese identity, I am certain that not enough women's voices and perspectives are featured in this book. It is nevertheless my hope that what I have presented here sparks ideas for future projects that will give more Oceanic female voices the spotlight that they deserve. After all, the lives of the people in the Marshall Islands pushes far beyond the scope of what I can express through language. And whether it will be language or not, I am certain that even after the strongest of storms the *ainikien* of *ṃōṇōṇōū* will resound.

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