

*As We
Used to
Float*

Within Bikini Atoll



NADIM SAMMAN

JULIAN CHARRIÈRE

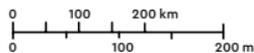
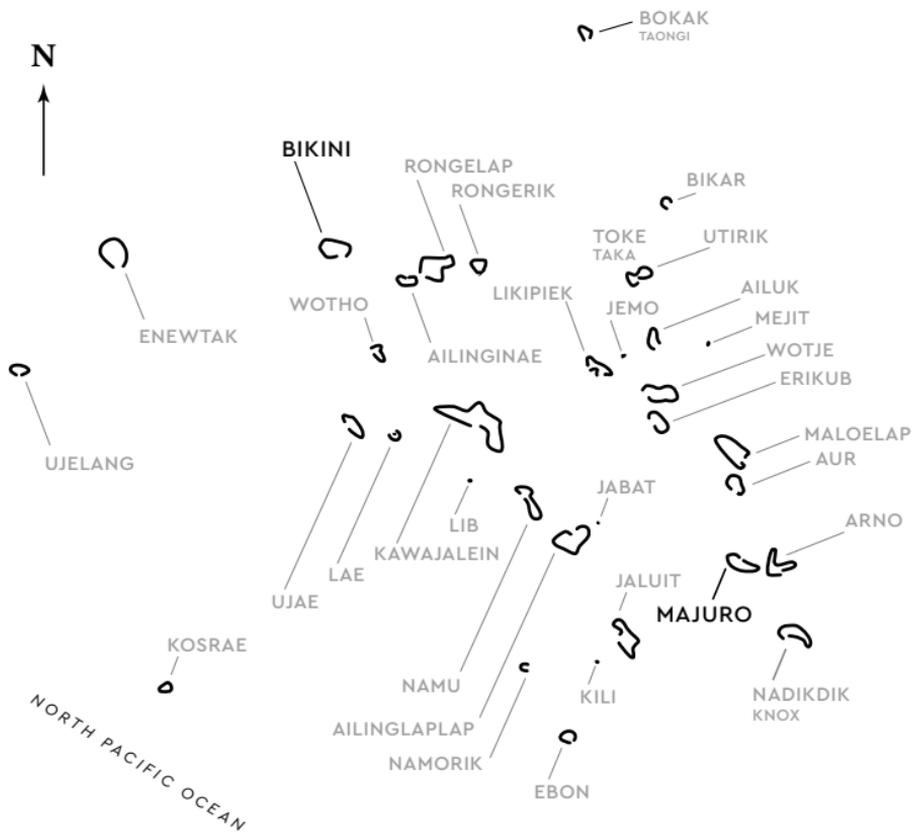
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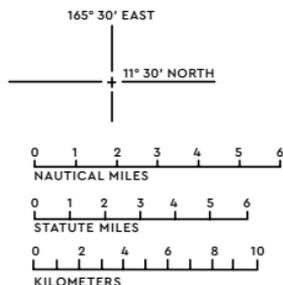
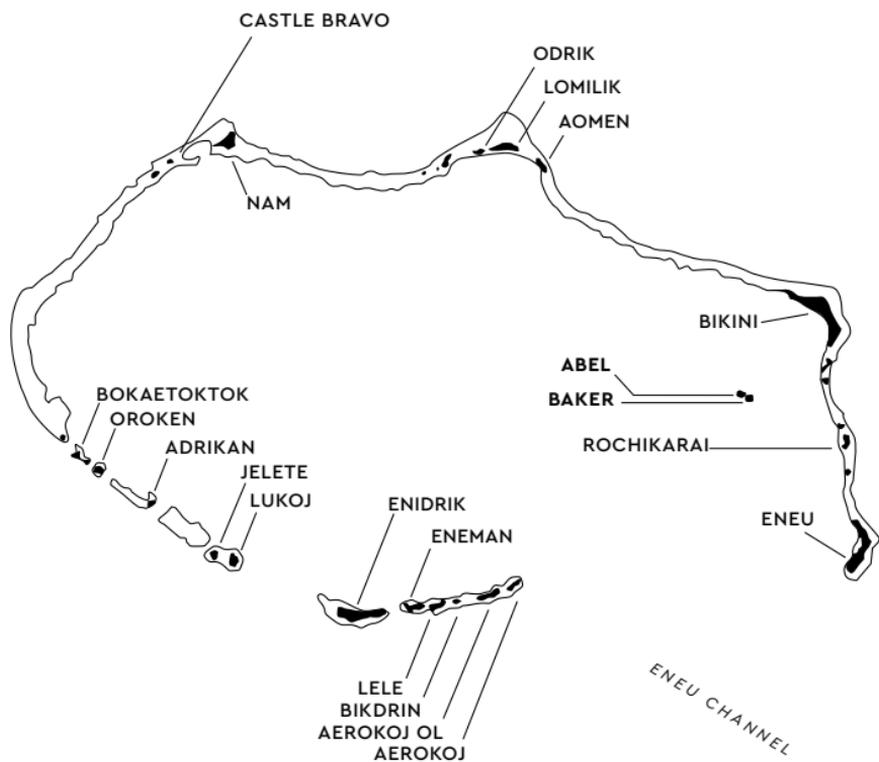
The true eye of the earth is water

GASTON BACHELARD

MARSHALL ISLANDS



BIKINI ATOLL



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Images are atoms of human attention. They combine to form molecules which, together, constitute the *atmosphere* of a culture. While particular arrangements of these molecules are experienced as discrete objects, they are nothing of the sort, but *complexes*. One should speak of the identity of an island-complex, just as one should a painting, in terms of density, dynamics, and stability. The cultural space is a continuum of complexes *as* atmospheric conditions. We are always immersed. Sometimes we float, suspended within a specific condition for years, taking local equilibrium for a universal composition. Sometimes we swim.

PIKINNI

Bikini lies beyond the forty-eight-hour delivery rule. A global network of cars, trains, and airplanes can only get you to the dock at Majuro, capital of the Marshall Islands, before an ocean journey must begin. There is no ferry, and only one suitable vessel is available for charter—the Windward, a beaten up pearl diver from the 1970s. Once you have concluded negotiations with its owner you can embark, entering a parenthesis in your life; a capsule, outside time and phone signal. Out in the wide Pacific, flows of energy run up against the beam, tipping the boat from side to side, constantly, in the spell it takes for you to become a sailor. The passage is an initiation, or sickness,

that finally breaks with sunrise and first sight of land.

The island is a line of green floating on a raft of yellow sand, a shock of luminous color like a gem set within another—the lagoon. It is a picture of *the good* as a geographical figure, so related in brochures promising space beyond the metropolitan everyday. You cannot help but recognize it as a place you have wanted, a figure centrally located in a dream that is our culture.

It is only after fully indulging this reflex that your gaze steadies. For the last seventy years, it has been a veritable ghostland. Between 1946 and 1958, twenty-three of the most powerful man-made explosions in history, delivering a combined fission yield of 42.2 megatons, occurred here. The force of one of these, Castle Bravo, was enough to vaporize three islands and gouge a massive crater—measuring 800 meters in diameter—out of the primordial reef. Another threw a fleet of captured and decommissioned World War II battleships—some of them more than 250 meters long—up into the air. A few were ripped to shreds. Others, like the USS Saratoga and the HIJMS Nagato—storied flagships of the United States and Japanese navies—eventually sank to the bottom, where their rusting hulks remain. During this period, obliterated geology would become radioactive particles,

carried on the wind to then fall on communities in neighboring atolls. Meanwhile, the people of Bikini, who had been asked to “temporarily” leave their home to make way for a series of experiments disingenuously ventured “for the good of mankind and to end all wars,” began to learn the meaning of a dispossession that continues until present. Today, the atoll bears architectural scars that stand as profane registers of this program, and its unresolved consequences—a series of concrete bunkers, jutting out from the shore. A terminal beach.

THE BOMB

There is a photograph of the atoll taken in 1946. It was created on Bikini Island, from a position overlooking the lagoon. In the foreground, a few architectural forms are followed by a row of palms, then the land ends. But you don't notice any of this at first. Instead, your attention is drawn to a cumulonimbus filling much of the frame, sitting atop a giant column, rising up from the water's surface into the sky. This is not a naturally occurring cloud, but the fruit of human experiment. It is an extraordinary image: the world's first hydrogen bomb, captured mid-explosion during the Baker shot. The strangeness of this picture intensifies the more you look at it: While the terrible violence

of the nuclear reaction, ripping molecules apart, unfolds on the horizon, it has yet to affect the place where the photograph was taken. During the click of the camera's shutter, and not a second longer, the island still experiences calm: the leaves of its trees unmoved by wind; not a grain of sand out of place on the beach. A last moment of peace.

But there is more. Atop the water's skin, positioned in consecutive rings that ripple outwards from the column, numerous silhouettes announce an armada. Battleships, all of them, anchored at various distances from the epicenter to settle a disagreement between the navy and the air force concerning how such behemoths might hold up in the face of a blast. The shadow of these vessels throw the magnitude of the cloud into relief: at 264 meters long, the largest of them, the aircraft carrier USS Saratoga, appears utterly dwarfed. Beyond this, it is the register of an outrageous power that stirs the mind: at the bottom right of the column, the 171-meter USS Arkansas is being sucked up into the sky. You can only imagine the moment afterwards: a fiery wind and an atomic tsunami, overturning the palms, washing the beach away, scattering ships like so much flotsam.

In 1968, the Apollo 8 Astronaut William Anders would capture the whole Earth in a photograph. Some have claimed that this picture, which

was distributed worldwide on magazine pages and TV screens, helped to spur broader understanding of the planet as a single system, bolstering the nascent environmentalism movement. But if *Earthrise*, as the picture has come to be known, was the birth of a new mass-cultural relation to ecology, the US Department of Energy's documentation of Baker was its birth pang: For the image of a jewel-like planet, suspended in space, to contribute to the urgency of conservation initiatives, there had to be a prior vision of the stakes involved. Photographs of Baker are that vision. One of immense tumult, wrought by man on the scale of earthquakes and hurricanes; an exponential increase in our species' capacity to destroy; a hazard raised to the all-encompassing dimensions of clouds and oceans—climate itself.

At the time of the Able and Baker tests, eighteen tons of cinematography equipment and more than half the world's supply of film stock was present at Bikini; every bomb photographed and filmed from a multitude of angles. While much of this effort served an analytic enterprise on the part of military scientists and engineers, it also had a propaganda function. It was in the Marshall Islands that the nuclear blast as an image-project reached its apogee: a performance writ large, attended by a huge public relations machine. This

aspect of Operation Crossroads rendered one of the most remote places in the world the most photographed. In this light, just as one talks about the science of the bombs, or the testing of warheads at Bikini, one must also talk about the manipulation of the global visual imaginary—deploying pictures as munitions.

But in order to *shoot*, the camera had to take on a new dimension. The array of concrete housings that it would leave behind on white-sand beaches stand as the ruins of a studio apparatus dedicated to producing visions of a new world order. Bikini's modern trauma—its culture exiled, its land blasted, vaporized in places, burned and irradiated—issued from the desire to create an atomic iconography. A dense cloud of images resulted from the explosions there, particles of which continue to circulate, today, constitutive of our cultural atmosphere. As we float within them, it bears remembering that, in the geopolitical Cold War, what was cold was only the surface of the pages and screens that bore the sign of the mushroom cloud. Bikini burned hotter than anything before.

THE BEAM

Hands locked around a bouncing steel beam. Lurching, up, down, side-to-side—as you try to keep your body stable in the lagoon’s pull. This weird place: uncanny and dangerous. Hanging six meters below the surface, sucking on a rusty bottle of mixed gas, aware that a mistake, a failing grip, may be a mortal error.

Counting seconds for forty minutes is a recipe for panic. So you seek respite in shifting rays of sunlight which seem to emanate from the deep and not above. A school of fish. Even so, one’s psychology needs to maintain neutral buoyancy, rising and falling into states of reverie or strict concentration, respectively, as regular as one’s breathing.

Control is everything.

What are you doing here? Why spend months in pursuit of this place? Remembering: Costa Rica—panic at depth, in a brown cloud of plankton. Tortuga—sitting on the ocean floor, waiting. Ink—fingers cut by a buoy line, micro-organisms in the wound. But not everything is so dark. Golfito—that first encounter with a dolphin pod, their undulations. The nocturnal arc of mantas in the Sea of Cortez. The Cenotes—shafts of light from the jungle canopy, piercing the ground water, illuminating a cave.

Seconds pass. You know.