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Navigating the Climate Crisis: Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner's Creative Constellations

Abstract

As an artist and activist of Marshallese descent, Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner is fearlessly critical of the role the United States has played in the destruction of Marshallese lands, seas, and bodies through its ongoing military occupation and its nuclear testing in the mid-20th century. In this paper, I analyze two video poems by Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner and director Dan Lin that relate this historical violence to contemporary climate change, calling on the American public to hold themselves accountable. In moving between local and global issues and past and present experiences, *Anointed* (2018) and *Rise: From One Island to Another* (2018) make visible the networks of relation, or constellations, that link climate change to colonial history and to differential power relations that structure the present. I argue the video poems resist both the naturalized associations between military strength and power, and between Oceania as insignificant and disposable. These are the supposed relationships that dominate the public imaginary and structure political power in the United States and around the globe, and it is those same relationships that give shape to the sorts of climate change “solutions” that will merely perpetuate universalist and imperialist structures of power. But more than merely reflective, the constellations Jetñil-Kijiner creates through her poetry, performances, and videos are productive—they provide the means to navigate *away* from the current trajectory of climate meltdown and imperial power. In “looking for more stories,” as Jetñil-Kijiner says, the poet creates constellations by which present and emerging wayfinders can navigate and resist the “intensified colonialism,” to quote Kyle Powys Whyte, of climate change.

Introduction

In her poem “Tell Them,” artist, activist, and poet Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner describes sending a gift of woven earrings from the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) to her friends in the United States. The poet asks her friends to wear the earrings to the grocery store, on the bus, during all the seemingly mundane tasks that fill their days. “When others ask you where you got this,” Jetñil-Kijiner says,

you tell them
they're from the Marshall Islands.
...
tell them about the water
how we have seen it rising
flooding across our cemeteries
gushing over the sea walls
and crashing against our homes
...
but most importantly tell them
we don't want to leave

we've never wanted to leave
and that we
are nothing without our islands.¹

In demanding that people recognize the impact of sea level rise on the RMI, Jetñil-Kijiner creates what Elizabeth DeLoughrey calls “new webs of obligation in which we are held accountable.”² In particular, the poet calls on those living in the U.S. to recognize their complicity in the systems of power that have given rise to climate change. As an artist and activist of Marshallese descent, Jetñil-Kijiner is fearlessly critical of the role the U.S. has played in the destruction of Marshallese lands, seas, and bodies through its ongoing military occupation and its nuclear testing in the mid-20th century, and her work calls on the U.S. public to hold themselves accountable.³

In the context of this special issue, these webs of obligation and accountability can be considered constellations in the way they bring different communities, issues, and historical events

into relation with one another. I am especially attentive to the way seemingly different things (historical moments, geographical locations, identity formations, etc.) are in fact deeply and significantly related to one another. For instance, my discussion below reveals the way the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) is implicated in rising seas. Such a relation is often rendered invisible in the public imaginary, while other relations, such as the association between military strength and progress, are naturalized and made hyper-visible. Constellations are therefore crucial for both constituting political power and for making visible counter-narratives that challenge and re-shape that power. In the context of climate change, this is especially needed because the decisions being made on how to combat climate change are informed by a willful silencing of the deeply interconnected issues of environmental racism, ongoing colonization, and decision-making power. In this paper, I discuss two video poems by Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner and director Dan Lin that make visible such connections and call on their viewers to consider historical injustices when taking action against climate change.

In *Anointed* (2018), Jetñil-Kijiner relates an American story of military power and scientific progress to a Marshallese story of radiation poisoning, displacement from ancestral homes, and ecological devastation. In *Rise: From One Island to Another* (2018), the poet collaborates with another Indigenous poet and activist, Aka Niviâna, from Greenland to combine a universal tale of climate change on the planetary scale with a localized tale of embodied experience and rootedness in place. At the center of both video poems is the relationship between imperial control and ecological devastation, each building a set of relationships, a constellation, that demands a justice-oriented framework for thinking about climate change.

By revealing the relationship between imperialism and climate change, Jetñil-Kijiner is actively resisting ongoing imperial control over Marshallese lands, seas, and bodies. But more than merely reflective, the constellations she creates through her poetry, performances, and videos are productive—they provide the means to navigate *away* from the current trajectory of climate meltdown and imperial power. This brings me to another, more literal, way of thinking about constellations: as

clusters of stars that provide points of reference by which to locate oneself and with which to navigate across time and space. This is an apt definition of constellations for the context of Oceania, whose regional identity is founded on the rich tradition of long-distance voyaging on double-hulled canoes using stars and ocean currents to navigate between islands. Jetñil-Kijiner's work functions like seasonal constellations by guiding her viewers toward "new stories," as Jetñil-Kijiner calls them, with which to act in the face of climate change.⁴

Canoes, Mushroom Clouds, and a Turtle Shell – Navigating History in *Anointed*

New stories of climate change are desperately needed right now. The current narratives being told about the climate catastrophe fall into the trap of universalist thinking that renders Oceania insignificant and disposable, reproducing the imperialist ideology that allowed for the occupation of Indigenous lands and the displacement of Oceanic peoples in the first place. A universalist framework tends to obscure the root causes of climate change and therefore allows those most accountable to escape responsibility. It is now hard to dispute the fact that those hit hardest by rising temperatures, melting ice caps, extreme weather events, and the host of problems that accompany these phenomena are the least responsible for the root cause: fossil fuel emissions and the global economic system that prioritizes resource extraction and wealth production over all else.⁵ In the context of Oceania and settler societies such as the United States, those least responsible for climate change include Indigenous communities who continue to feel the weight of colonial exploitation of their lands and bodies. Kyle Powys Whyte has even argued climate change is a form of "intensified colonialism":

The colonial invasion that began centuries ago caused anthropogenic environmental changes that rapidly disrupted many Indigenous peoples, including deforestation, pollution, modification of hydrological cycles, and the amplification of soil-use and terraforming for particular types of farming, grazing, transportation, and residential, commercial and

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government infrastructure...Indigenous peoples [therefore] often understand their vulnerability to climate change as an intensification of colonially-induced environmental changes.⁶

By looking at the longer histories of violence at the root of climate change in colonized lands, climate justice scholars like Whyte are pushing back against the rhetoric of institutions like the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, which uses vague terms that refer to “the climate system” as a whole and whose mitigation guidelines remain voluntary and nonbinding.⁷ This allows business to continue as usual and fails to account for the lived experiences by different groups of people. This dominant frame paints such a vague picture of climate change that it leaves the public with a feeling of helplessness or worse, detachment. The rhetoric of such reports and agreements is also colonial in nature, for they rely on a culturally-specific form of scientific research while dismissing, marginalizing, or diminishing Indigenous forms of knowledge about the environment and people’s roles in it.⁸ This perpetuates the centuries-long practice of erasing Indigenous perspectives and claiming the power to decide their future. To combat such a universalizing and imperialist discourse, people like Kyle Powys Whyte and Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner are creating webs of intersecting stories that implicate colonial history and imperial attitudes in the climate crisis. For Jetñil-Kijiner, the “colonial invasion” that Whyte describes above includes the forced displacement of Micronesians in the 1940s-60s by the U.S. military for its nuclear weapons testing program.

At the end of World War II, the United Nations established the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands in 1947, to be administered by the United States. At the same time, the U.S. began extensively developing its nuclear weapons arsenal and conducted the first nuclear tests on Bikini Atoll in the Marshall Islands in 1946. Testing continued in the Trust Territory with roughly sixty-seven more detonations between 1946 and 1958.⁹ The tests devastated the ecosystems on these atolls, rendering the islands uninhabitable and forcing the Indigenous community to move elsewhere. In the days, months, and decades that followed, they experienced birth defects and

miscarriages as well as thyroid disorders and cancer. In 1979, the Marshall Islands gained independence, becoming the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), and in 1986 signed a Compact of Free Association with the U.S. Under this compact, citizens of the RMI are able to live and work in the U.S. and the country receives economic aid (among other federal programs). In exchange, the U.S. has exclusive control over land and waterways for its military operations, therefore continuing its occupation and perpetuating “colonially-induced” changes to the environment.

The continuing presence of the U.S. military in the RMI has had devastating effects on the ecosystems and people who live there: from the drastic transformation of land into urbanized centers, to the development of infrastructure such as roads and airplane runways, and finally to the pollution of waterways that include but are not limited to the residual radiation from the nuclear tests. The reduction of the local biodiversity, increasing food scarcity, and separation from ancestral homes is now further exacerbated by rising sea levels and global climate change. In fact, Elizabeth DeLoughrey has said “[m]ilitarism remains the elephant in the room when considering issues of climate change, globalization, and the Anthropocene.”¹⁰

Anointed (2018) was the centerpiece for the Pacific Resources for Education and Learning (PREL) Nuclear Legacies Project in 2018—a series of screenings, gatherings, exhibitions, and storytelling that explored the continuing effect of nuclear tests on Pacific Islanders. The video poem, directed by Dan Lin, follows Jetñil-Kijiner’s journey to the Runit Dome, a massive concrete structure on the island of Runit in Enewetak Atoll. In 1977, the U.S. government dumped more than 3 million cubic feet of radioactive debris into a crater left by one of the nuclear tests and covered it with a concrete dome, now known locally as the “tomb.” As a coral atoll, the surface of Enewetak is inherently porous and permeable. Therefore, the 18-inch layer of concrete that was poured on top of the toxic waste does not prevent sea water from entering the dome through the permeable soil at the bottom of the crater. With increasing storms and king tides—a symptom of global warming and sea level rise—the dome is becoming more and more precarious. According

to a recent article in the *LA Times*, cracks are beginning to show around the edges of the dome and the concrete cap could even “slide off” (fig. 1).¹¹

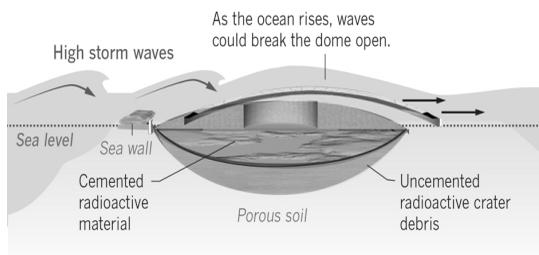


Fig. 1 Department of Defense, Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, from Susanne Rust, “How the U.S. betrayed Marshall Islands, kindling the next nuclear disaster,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 10, 2019, <https://www.latimes.com/projects/marshall-islands-nuclear-testing-sea-level-rise/>. Image permission: *Los Angeles Times*.

With its fissures and crevasses snaking into the water, the dome, or more rightly the tomb, materializes the relationship between the past of nuclear testing and colonial territorialization and the present condition of climate meltdown and rising seas. *Anointed* follows Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner’s journey to Runit Dome as she tries to make sense of this connection between past and present, between nuclear imperialism and rising seas:

There must be more to this than
incinerated trees,
A cracked dome, a rising sea, a leaking
nuclear waste with no fence,
There must be more than a concrete shell
that houses death.¹²

In placing nuclear imperialism front and center in Jetñil-Kijiner’s story about rising sea levels in the RMI, the film actively pushes back against the rhetorical and visual tropes that have rendered this story invisible in public and political discourse. The material and biological devastation wrought by U.S. colonialism and militarism in Oceania is founded upon the notion that the region is remote and expendable. In 1993, Tongan scholar Epeli Hau’ofa delivered a landmark speech that captured the essence of this framework, which imagines Oceania as merely a bunch of “islands in a far sea”; Hau’ofa writes,

According to this view, the small island
states and territories of the Pacific, that

is, all of Polynesia and Micronesia, are much too small, too poorly endowed with resources, and too isolated from the centers of economic growth for their inhabitants ever to be able to rise above their present condition of dependence on the largesse of wealthy nations.¹³

The notion that Pacific Islands are remote and insignificant has very real economic, political, and material consequences, such as when Secretary of State Henry Kissinger reputedly justified military occupation of Micronesia by saying “there’s only 90,000 people out there. Who gives a damn?”¹⁴ More recently, when former Attorney General Jeff Sessions, responding to the Hawaiian judge who blocked President Trump’s travel ban against Muslims in 2017, said “I really am amazed that a judge sitting on an island in the Pacific can issue an order that stops the president of the United States from what appears to be clearly his statutory and constitutional power.”¹⁵ Hau’ofa’s “sea of islands” is a powerful reaction to this kind of continental thinking because he argues the Pacific Islands are never in the middle of nowhere, but are instead connected in a vast network of relationships that have been shifting, re-connecting, and growing for centuries.

Referring to the original navigators who first discovered and inhabited the regions commonly (and problematically) known as Polynesia, Micronesia, and Melanesia, Hau’ofa describes:

Theirs was a large world in which
peoples and cultures moved and
mingled, unhindered by boundaries
of the kind erected much later by
imperial powers. From one island
to another they sailed to trade and
to marry, thereby expanding social
networks for greater flows of wealth.¹⁶

Like Hau’ofa and those before him, Jetñil-Kijiner uses the figure of the canoe to navigate her way. *Anointed* begins with a view of the ocean from the deck of a double-hulled canoe, pitching from side to side as waves splash against the hull (fig. 2). The first time we see Jetñil-Kijiner, she is sitting on this canoe, looking into the sun through squinted eyes as if looking out for the island while wondering aloud “will I find an island or a tomb?” (fig. 3).¹⁷



Fig. 2 Still image from *Anointed*, 2018. Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner and Dan Lin, <https://www.kathyjetnikijiner.com/videos-featuring-kathy/>. Image permission: Dan Lin.



Fig. 3 Still image from *Anointed*, 2018. Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner and Dan Lin, <https://www.kathyjetnikijiner.com/videos-featuring-kathy/>. Image permission: Dan Lin.

The opening scene of waves crashing against the hull creates a horizontal seascape that is in stark contrast to the way Pacific Islands are predominantly portrayed to global audiences. Coral atolls such as those which make up the Marshall Islands are often shown from an aerial viewpoint, emphasizing the narrowness of the atolls and heightening the perceived smallness and isolation of “islands in a far sea.” The aerial perspective also echoes the rhetoric of isolation because it captures how vast the surrounding ocean is in comparison to the strips of land barely breaking the surface of the water. Elizabeth DeLoughrey has further shown how aerial views serve the imperial project of territorial expansion and exploitation by portraying these spaces as controllable and contained under the all-seeing eye of U.S. military surveillance.¹⁸ Rather than such an imperialist view, *Anointed's* ability to capture the sound of the waves, the horizon line as it moves up and down, the motion of the canoe tipping from side to side as it succumbs to the force of the water, all convey a much more dynamic, lived space of connection and vitality. Jetñil-Kijiner’s voice then fills our ears: “I’m coming to meet you”—at once

humanizing this seascape and addressing the island as a being in its own right, not an object that can be claimed and controlled by military surveillance.

Interestingly, the militarized, aerial perspective does appear in certain parts of the film, creating a meaningful juxtaposition between these two ways of seeing. Drone footage of Runit Island provides a bird’s-eye-view of the massive concrete form of Runit Dome, accompanied by an aerial shot of the island evoking the natural splendor that has come to be associated with the Pacific: clear blue waters, pristine white sand, lush breadfruit trees (fig. 4). Rather than playing into these stereotypical images, however, I argue this is a strategic appropriation of the type of imagery used in the ongoing project to control and exploit island territories.



Fig. 4 Still image from *Anointed*, 2018. Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner and Dan Lin, <https://www.kathyjetnikijiner.com/videos-featuring-kathy/>. Image permission: Dan Lin.

As the poet softly declares “you were a whole island once,” the viewers witness an eerie collision of worlds: on one hand, the idyllic vision of islands as paradise, on the other hand the military-industrial complex of the United States.¹⁹ Such a juxtaposition reverses the militarized gaze and in turn surveils the United States’ presence on Enewetak. This reversal would be jarring to an audience that is conditioned to see island spaces as ahistorical and devoid of violence, and such a juxtaposition calls into question the broader public’s imagination of Pacific islands as simultaneously remote and enticing.

But as the view shifts to a setting sun, Jetñil-Kijiner adds “Then, you became testing ground.” Next we see a quick succession of nuclear detonations, subverting the audience’s idea of an idyllic tropical island (fig. 5). The setting sun shown just before, with its blinding yellows and oranges, looks eerily similar to what the poet calls the “inferno of blazing heat” and the iconic mushroom cloud in the images that follow. The

juxtaposition evokes the rhetoric surrounding nuclear testing in the 1940s and 50s that equated nuclear radiation with solar power. Elizabeth DeLoughrey gives numerous examples of this: from President Truman's declaration that "the force from which the sun draws its power has been loosed against those who brought war to the Far East," to the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) chair comparing atomic energy to the sun by saying "in its rays is the magic stuff of life itself."²⁰



Fig. 5 Still image from *Anointed*, 2018. Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner and Dan Lin, <https://www.kathyjetmilkijiner.com/videos-featuring-kathy/>. Image permission: Dan Lin.

With this context in mind, it might be easy to consider the equivalence between the setting sun and nuclear warfare in *Anointed* as merely perpetuating the kind of imagery that "renders the detonation of more than two thousand nuclear weapons since 1945 almost invisible to history."²¹ However, I argue it has a different effect because of Jetñil-Kijiner's storytelling that accompanies these images. She does not render the island as a space of alterity through the comparison to solar energy or through the aerial view that renders the island a laboratory or microcosm of the universe.²² Instead, she speaks directly to the island itself: "How shall we remember you? You were a whole island, once."

There must be more to this
than a concrete shell that houses death.
Here is a story of another shell.
Anointed with power.

The story is of a legendary figure named Letao, who was anointed with power by his mother, a turtle goddess, upon receiving a part of her shell. Letao then gifted his power to a small boy, who lost control and wreaked havoc on his people. As Jetñil-Kijiner describes the chaos that ensued, the frame turns to aerial footage of a nuclear weapon being detonated

off the coast of a coral atoll. The initial explosion looks tiny in comparison to the surrounding ocean, which expands outside all edges of the frame—the viewers are witnessing the first gift of fire that went on to "almost bur[n] his entire village to the ground." At this point, the screen shifts to a growing mushroom cloud—the tiny gift of fire has grown beyond control. Next we see a row of palm trees consumed by flames, as Jetñil-Kijiner describes the way "licks of fire leapt from skin and bones."

The imagery comes from the immense archive of photographic and film footage that documented the nuclear tests in the 1940s and 50s. The AEC went to great pains making sure the tests were visually documented so they could later use it as propaganda about the strength of the US military. In fact, there was a top secret film unit established in 1947 tasked with documenting the tests, resulting in roughly 6500 films.²³ Beyond this official archive, the figure of the atomic bomb proliferated in popular culture, for instance in the form of Louis Reard's bikini bathing suit, or a "Miss Atomic Bomb" competition in 1957, or the infamous photograph of military officials cutting into a cake in the shape of a mushroom cloud.²⁴ The ubiquity of the mushroom cloud was "so naturalized that the American public casually blamed any inclement weather on the atomic bomb."²⁵ Furthermore, its circulation in the public sphere glamorized and sexualized the bomb in the American imagination, disassociating the weapon from the extreme violence wrought on Indigenous peoples and their homes.

In *Anointed*, the mushroom cloud becomes less and less familiar as a glamorized sign of scientific advancement and military power. Instead, the audience begins to think of it as a dangerous form of (mythical, ancestral, historically rooted) power over which the young boy has lost control. Using this story to frame the current disaster on Runit, Jetñil-Kijiner asks who anointed the United States with the power to destroy her homeland? And I would add, who anointed them with the power to re-write history so that the dome was left out of public consciousness? By using archival images of the nuclear tests to visualize the story of Letao's trickery, Jetñil-Kijiner subverts the original, celebratory purpose of the footage and instead makes manifest the linkages between military imperialism, representations

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of islands as remote and dispensable, and rising sea levels due to climate change.

In visualizing this connection between past and present, Jetñil-Kijiner envisions a future that does not inevitably lead to neocolonial structures of governance and climate change “solutions.” Rather, the video poem offers a different path, one produced by a different story about power that grew out of control, and which continues to grow. But, just as in the story of Letao and the young boy as it is told in *Anointed*, the ending is not yet written and the path is not inevitable. Instead, we can follow a different guide, perhaps a new constellation, that is *informed* by histories of violence and empire, rather than one which ignores the lessons of the past.

Gifts and Sisterhood – Bridging the Distance of Climate Change in *Rise*

Over twenty years after Hau’ofa reminded us that Oceanic peoples enlarged their worlds through voyaging “from one island to another,” Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner echoes his vision in *Rise: From One Island To Another*, her 2018 collaboration with Aka Niviána, director Dan Lin, and 350.org.²⁶ The film documents Jetñil-Kijiner’s journey to meet Niviána across the vast distance between their homes: Jetñil-Kijiner is coming from Aelon Kein Ad (the Marshall Islands), while Niviána is waiting to greet her in Kalaallit Nunaat (Greenland). The video poem begins with an image of Jetñil-Kijiner’s bare feet, standing on the sand as she faces the ocean. We later see Aka Niviána’s feet, snug in warm boots, walking across hard-packed ice. When she arrives, Jetñil-Kijiner gives Niviána a handwoven basket containing shells from the coral atolls that make up the RMI. Niviána welcomes Jetñil-Kijiner with a gift of her own: three stones “picked,” she says, “from the shores of Nuuk, the foundation of the land” she calls home. When they finally reach each other, their gifts sit together on the ice as a symbol of partnership and coalition in the face of ecological devastation (fig. 6). It is this ice that is rapidly melting and causing the seas to rise, threatening their island communities separated by thousands of miles. *Rise* poetically and powerfully conveys the devastating effect of ecological instability on their homes, but like *Anointed*, climate change here is situated in a different, related story about forced displacement and Indigenous solidarity in the face of “colonizing monsters.”

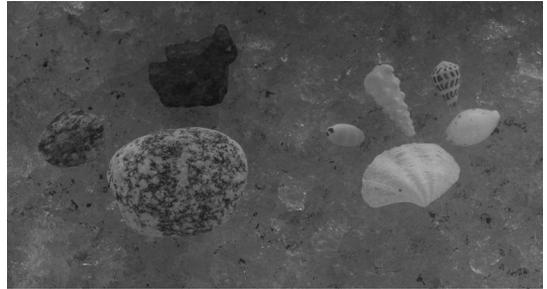


Fig. 6 Still image from *Rise: From One Island to Another*, 2018. Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner, Aka Niviána, Dan Lin, 350.org. <https://350.org/rise-from-one-island-to-another/>. Image permission: Dan Lin.

In the poem, Jetñil-Kijiner tells the story of:

Two sisters frozen in time on the island
of Ujae,
one magically turned into stone
the other who chose that life
to be rooted by her sister’s side.

The imagery and prose throughout the film implies these two Indigenous poets are the two sisters from the story, standing strong in a partnership that bridges the geographical and ideological divides that have been imposed upon them. As Jaimey Hamilton Faris recently argued, the poem forms a “trans-oceanic space of solidarity” between the two women:²⁷

...they become the sister stone pillars,
together a ‘we.’ While not meant to
flatten the very different watery contexts
and situations in which they each live,
they specifically choose to recognize their
shared interests and form a ‘we’ to enforce
what feminist scholar Chandra Mohanty
calls Indigenous embodied solidarity...²⁸

At one point in the film, we see Jetñil-Kijiner standing on a boat off the edge of the glacial coast, creating the sense that she is arriving to Greenland after a long journey from the Marshall Islands (possible by canoe?). “Let me show you the tide,” she says, “that comes for us faster than we’d like to admit.” We then see Niviána waiting, surrounded by ice that extends in every direction beyond the camera’s frame. “Can you see our glaciers groaning,” she asks, “with the weight of the world’s heat?” Here, the two women establish a relationship

between their islands: one that is melting, the other that is receiving, like Letao's dangerous gift, the melted ice in increasingly devastating amounts.

Not only does this act of solidarity masterfully navigate both the local and global scales of climate change, it also subverts the rhetoric of isolation and expendability that has occupied the colonial imaginary and which continues to marginalize Oceania in public discourse. Instead, Niviâna says

On our journey
may the same unshakable foundation
connect us,
make us stronger,
than the colonizing monsters
that to this day devour our lives
for their pleasure.

The linked experiences between melting glaciers in Greenland and rising seas in the Marshall Islands are made manifest in *Rise* by a series of visual equivalences. Repeating throughout the film are shots of the gifts each woman brings. In one instance, we see Jetñil-Kijiner's hands holding out a basket containing white shells speckled with shades of brown and black. Another frame echoes this gift by showing Niviâna's hands cradling three rocks of similar hues. Recall the scenes described above in which the gifts are symmetrically laid out on the ice in mirroring circles and the two women's feet face toward one another on sand and ice.

The poem they recite together echoes the mirroring structure of the film footage: "Sister of ice and snow, I'm coming to you" it begins, followed by "Sister of ocean and sand, I welcome you." It continues in this way, each woman responding to the other:

Sister of ice and snow,
I bring with me these shells
that I picked from the shores
of Bikini Atoll and Runit Dome

Sister of ocean and sand
I hold these stones picked from the shores
of Nuuk

...

With these shells I bring a story of long ago
...

With these rocks I bring
A story told countless times

And while the imagery conveys this connection over geographical distance through the mirroring images and words, the poem additionally creates a connection between colonial history and the present. Notice the way Niviâna refers to the "colonizing monsters" in the quote above, and recall how Jetñil-Kijiner's gift is from Runit Dome and Bikini Atoll. In fact, the two poets refer to the United States nuclear weapons testing programs in both their homes, once again bridging the perceived gap between climate change, imperialism, and militarism.

Sister of ice and snow,
I come to you now in grief
mourning landscapes
that are always forced to change

first through wars inflicted on us
then through nuclear waste
dumped
in our waters
on our ice
and now this.

Toward the end of the film, we see two mirroring shots again, this time they are aerial views of each woman surrounded by the land (and seas) of her ancestors (figs. 7 & 8). The women even take similar poses: Niviâna, a dark figure in all-black clothing, lies on her back surrounded by bright, white snow. Jetñil-Kijiner floats face-up in a lagoon, hair spreading out in the water and legs almost disappearing below the surface. Here, the aerial perspective appears again, but like *Anointed* it reverses the gaze of military surveillance that renders Oceanic territories as lifeless and controllable, remote and dispensable. Rather, these images evoke landscapes and seascapes that are embodied, lived, and living. Viewers can sense the expansiveness of these spaces by how small the two women appear, but this scale is centered on the Indigenous bodies that bind the overlapping forces of melting ice caps, imperial expansion, and legendary stories into one constellation.



Fig. 7 Still image from *Rise: From One Island to Another*, 2018. Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner, Aka Niviãna, Dan Lin, 350.org. <https://350.org/rise-from-one-island-to-another/>. Image permission: Dan Lin.



Fig. 8 Still image from *Rise: From One Island to Another*, 2018. Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner, Aka Niviãna, Dan Lin, 350.org. <https://350.org/rise-from-one-island-to-another/>. Image permission: Dan Lin.

Conclusion

In moving between local and global issues, past and present experiences, Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner and Dan Lin’s video poems make visible the networks of relation that link climate change to colonial history and differential power relations that structure the present. These networks are created through alternative stories, simultaneously subverting dominant ideologies and offering different contexts with which to understand climate change. Such new stories resist the naturalized associations between military strength and power, between Oceania as insignificant and its people, land, and waters as

disposable. These are the narratives that dominate the public imaginary and structure political power in the United States and around the globe, and it is those same narratives that give shape to climate change “solutions” that will merely perpetuate universalist and imperialist assumptions.

In *Anointed*, the image of the mushroom cloud illustrates a different story than one of glamor, science, and military strength. Instead, Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner tells a story of violent, terrible power that is wielded out of control by a young and naïve individual. In *Rise*, Jetñil-Kijiner and Aka Niviãna resist the dominant discourse of universal climate change and peripheral Indigenous territories by bridging their geographical distance and telling their story in sisterhood. Both films creatively forge these connections through mirroring shots and quick successions of frames to reinforce the relationships being evoked in the poetic narration. The sounds and movements of the living oceans and lands are no longer rendered controllable or distant but are instead embodied, living, and which provide the very means of establishing these connections. In “looking for more stories,” as Jetñil-Kijiner says in *Anointed*, the poet creates constellations by which present and emerging wayfinders can navigate and resist the “intensified colonialism” of climate change.

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Maggie Wander is a PhD Candidate in Visual Studies at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Her dissertation project focuses on contemporary artists in Oceania who interrogate the colonial foundations of ecological devastation. She has presented her work internationally at conferences including the College Art Association and the European Society of Oceanists. Her writing has been published in *The Contemporary Pacific*, *Commonwealth Essays and Studies*, and *Media Fields Journal*. Her research and writing has been generously supported by the Arts Division, Graduate Division, and the History of Art and Visual Culture department at UC Santa Cruz, as well as the Social Science Research Council. Maggie is the Managing Editor of *Refract: An Open Access Visual Studies Journal* and the co-Managing Editor of *Pacific Arts*, the journal of the Pacific Arts Association.

Notes

- 1 Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner, *Iep Jältok: Poems from a Marshallese Daughter* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2017), 64–67.
- 2 Elizabeth DeLoughrey, *Allegories of the Anthropocene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 195.
- 3 Jetñil-Kijiner has long been using her poetry to speak out against environmental injustice in the RMI. She has become one of the most important climate justice activists in Oceania since receiving international acclaim for her presentation at the UN Climate Summit in 2014. She was one of *Vogue's* Climate Warriors in 2015 and was recently named Climate Envoy for the RMI. She is the co-founder and director of Jo-Jikum, a nonprofit organization that empowers Marshallese youth to make a difference through storytelling, arts production, and environmental stewardship (<https://jojikum.org/>). Her book of poetry, *Iep Jältok: Poems from a Marshallese Daughter*, was published in 2017 (University of Arizona Press). She is continually experimenting with different ways to activate her poetry, including collaborations with other Indigenous women such as Aka Niviâna and a performance at the Smithsonian Asia Pacific American Center's 'Ae Kai Culture Lab in 2017 (<http://smithsonianapa.org/ae kai/>). In recent years, she has expanded her practice to performances, video poems, and gallery installations, even exhibiting at international venues including the 2017 Honolulu Biennial and the 9th Asia Pacific Triennial in 2019. Her video poems, including *Anointed and Rise*, can be viewed on her website <https://www.kathyjetnilkijiner.com/>.
- 4 There are many examples of thinkers and makers deeply invested in studying the region of Oceania who have shown this kind of constellational thinking about networks and relationality. For example, Vicente Diaz's mapping of indigeneity according to Austronesian seafaring techniques in "Voyaging for Anti-Colonial Recovery," *Pacific Asia Inquiry* 2, no. 1 (January 2011): 21–32. and Katerina Teaiwa's call for a multiscalar view of what she calls pan-pacific regionalism in "Our Rising Sea of Islands: Pan-Pacific Regionalism in the Age of Climate Change," *Pacific Studies* 41, no. 1/2 (Apr./Aug. 2018): 26–54.
- 5 A number of scholars have written about climate justice and the disproportionate impact of climate change on those most disadvantaged by current political, economic, social, and cultural structures, including: Brian Tokar, *Toward Climate Justice* (New Compass Press, 2014); Kum-Kum Bhavani et. al., eds. *Climate Futures: Re-imagining Global Climate Justice* (Zed Books, 2019); Kyle Powys Whyte, "Is it colonial déjà vu? Indigenous Peoples and Climate Injustice," in *Humanities for the Environment*, ed. Joni Adamson and Michael Davis, 88–105 (New York: Routledge, 2017).
- 6 Kyle Powys Whyte, "Indigenous Climate Change Studies: Indigenizing Futures, Decolonizing the Anthropocene," *English Language Notes* 55, no. 1–2 (2017): 154.
- 7 I am thinking, for example, of the UNFCCC's *Paris Agreement*, 2015.
- 8 Tony Crook and Craig Lind, "EU-Pacific Climate Change Policy and Engagement: A Social Science and Humanities Review," ECOPAS discussion paper, Work package 3, Deliverable D3.311, 2013.
- 9 David Hanlon, *Remaking Micronesia: Discourses over Development in a Pacific Territory, 1944–1982* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998), 186.
- 10 Elizabeth DeLoughrey, *Allegories of the Anthropocene*, 69. While not explicitly addressed in this paper, the notion of the Anthropocene offers another layer of complexity to the historical constellations created by Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner because it accounts for the long durée of climate breakdown. The Anthropocene is most commonly defined as the current geological epoch, following the Holocene. The term was popularized by Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer in 2000 ("The Anthropocene," *Global Change Newsletter* 41:17–18) and scholars have subsequently debated when exactly this epoch is supposed to have begun. Numerous scholars have proposed their own alternative terms, for example Jason W. Moore has extensively theorized the Capitalocene and Donna Haraway proposes the term Cthulucene, to name just two examples from a dizzying and ever-growing list of alternatives.
- 11 Susanne Rust, "How the U.S. betrayed Marshall Islands, kindling the next nuclear disaster," *Los Angeles Times*, November 10, 2019, <https://www.latimes.com/projects/marshall-islands-nuclear-testing-sea-level-rise/>.
- 12 Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner, *Anointed*, directed by Dan Lin (2008; Mainspring Media and Pacific Storytellers Cooperative), video, <https://www.kathyjetnilkijiner.com/videos-featuring-kathy/>.
- 13 Epeli Hau'ofa, "Our Sea of Islands," *The Contemporary Pacific* 6, no. 1 (1994):150.
- 14 Kissinger is alleged to have said this by numerous sources, one of the earliest encounters I had with this quote was in reading Valerie Kuletz's "The Movement for Environmental Justice in the Pacific Islands," in *The Environmental Justice Reader*, ed. Joni Adamson, Mei Mei Evans, and Rachel Stein (Tucson: University of

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Arizona Press, 2002), 126.

15 Jeff Sessions in a radio interview on the Mark Levin Show, April 19, 2017, <https://w.soundcloud.com/player/?url=https%3A//api.soundcloud.com/tracks/318650299>.

16 Hau'ofa, "Our Sea of Islands," 153-54.

17 The canoe she rides is the Vaka Motu, one of three double-hulled canoes built by the Okeanos Foundation and based on traditional Micronesian designs. For more on the Vaka Motu, see "Vaka Motu," *Okeanos*, <https://okeanos-foundation.org/vaka-motu/>; for more on the voyage to film *Anointed*, see "Pacific Nuclear Activist-Poet Tells Stories Through Culture," *Okeanos*, April 18, 2018, <https://okeanos-foundation.org/pacific-nuclear-activist-poet-tells-stories-through-culture-and-her-latest-poem/>. In addition to providing fossil fuel-free transportation, Okeanos highlights the way voyaging is at the core of many Pacific Islanders' identity, especially in the context of displacement at the hands of imperial forces. In 2018 and 2019, for example, Okeanos conducted trips to Bikini and Enewetak Atolls with survivors who hadn't seen their homes in decades ("Sustainable Sailboats Help Nuclear Victims Reclaim Voyaging Identity," *Okeanos*, February 13, 2019, <https://okeanos-foundation.org/sustainable-sailboats-help-nuclear-victims-reclaim-voyaging-identity/>).

18 Elizabeth DeLoughrey, "The myth of isolates: ecosystem ecologies in the nuclear Pacific," *Cultural Geographies* 20, no. 2 (2012): 167-184, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474474012463664>.

19 One could perhaps situate this film in a larger conversation about the ways Indigenous artists are using drone footage to push back against power "from above," as Caren Kaplan might phrase it (my thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out). For example, see Adrienne Keen and Gregory Hitch, "Drone Warriors: The Art of Surveillance and Resistance at Standing Rock," *Edge Effects*, November 7, 2019, <https://edgeeffects.net/drone-warriors-standing-rock/>.

20 DeLoughrey, *Allegories of the Anthropocene*, 73-74.

21 *Ibid.*, 66.

22 For more on the island as space of alterity, see Elizabeth DeLoughrey's use of Spivak's notion of "planetaryity" in *Allegories of the Anthropocene*, 74..

23 William J. Broad, "The bomb chroniclers," *The New York Times*, September 13, 2010, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/14/science/14atom.html>.

24 Teresia Teaiwa, "bikinis and other s/pacific n/oceans," *The Contemporary Pacific* 6, no. 1 (1994): 87-109; Mark Duffy, aka Copyrater, "Lee Merlin, Miss Atomic Bomb, 1957," *Buzzfeed*, March 8, 2013, <https://www.buzzfeed.com/copyrater/lee-merlin-miss-atomic-bomb-1957>; "The Atomic Cake Controversy of 1946," *Conelrad Adjacent*, September 7, 2010, <http://conelrad.blogspot.com/2010/09/atomic-cake-controversy-of-1946.html>.

25 DeLoughrey, *Allegories of the Anthropocene*, 73.

26 350.org is a global, grassroots organization fighting for climate justice through community organizing of global actions and protests and by providing public resources for other grassroots organizers. For more, see their website <https://350.org/>. For more information on 350.org's involvement with Rise, see <https://350.org/rise-from-one-island-to-another/>.

27 Jaimey Hamilton Faris, "Sisters of Ocean and Ice: On the Hydro-feminism of Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner and Aka Niviāna's *Rise: From One Island to Another*," *Shima* 13, no. 2 (2019): 91.

28 *Ibid.*, 84-85.