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Paradise and Apocalypse: Critiques of Nuclear Imperialism in Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner's *Iep Jāltok*

This article considers both the material and the psychic impact of the militarization of the Pacific, focusing primarily on Marshallese poet-activist Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner's first print collection, *Iep Jāltok* (2017). Interrogating the spatial mythologies that have made the Pacific Islands a key site for the US to test weapons and launch foreign wars, Jetñil-Kijiner exposes the racist and gendered logic that justifies colonial violence in the Pacific.

On the morning of January 13, 2018, people throughout Hawai'i scrambled to take shelter after an emergency alert announced that a North Korean ballistic missile was headed for the islands. Given its proximity to the Korean peninsula in comparison to the continental US, Hawai'i was the first state to prepare for nuclear attack when Pyongyang bolstered its arsenal in 2017 (Persio). For nearly forty minutes, panicked and confused civilians awaited destruction before government officials announced that the alert was a mistake (Wong). The false alarm carries both irony and threat for Indigenous peoples because of the United States' militarization of the Pacific Islands. Chamorro poet Craig Santos Perez, who lives and teaches in Hawai'i, commented that the Indigenous people of both Guam and Hawai'i daily witness the way in which their sacred lands are desecrated and polluted by military activity: "Our islands are not only basis [*sic.*] of war but they're also targets of other foreign militaries – so in a sense we're both a weapon and a target" (qtd. in Wong). Despite the fact that the Pacific has "been a 'strategic' site of American Empire," Santos Perez notes that it has also been "strategically invisible to the popular and scholarly American imaginary" (622, 623).

Following Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, the sacred Hawaiian grounds of Kaho'olawe were seized for weapons testing, and though activists were eventually able to reclaim the site in the 1990s, the Hawaiian archipelago continues to function as a key US military site for training, testing, and launching foreign wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (El Dessouky 260). After the world's first atomic testing in the New Mexico desert and subsequent bomb droppings in Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, the US selected the Bikini and Enewetak atolls in the Marshall Islands as ideal "proving grounds" for its weapons testing program and tested over 65 nuclear weapons over the course of the Cold War. Though US weapons testing ended in 1980, Bikini Atoll remains uninhabitable, and the lasting impacts of displacement and irradiation of land, water, and peoples are yet to be remediated by the US government ("Bikini Atoll Nuclear Test").¹

Interrogating the spatial mythologies that have made the Pacific Islands an important site for US weapons testing and launching of foreign wars, this article investigates a spectrum of enduring violence impacting Indigenous people and their environments.² Borrowing Santos Perez's phrase, I consider the gendered views that contribute to the "strategic invisibility" of militarization in the Pacific Islands in both American

1. In 2001, a nuclear claims tribunal determined that over \$2 billion in property and health damages was owed to the Republic of the Marshall Islands, but "there was no mechanism to force the United States to pay it" (Zak).

2. For other Pacific literatures that deal with nuclear imperialism, see Chantal Spitz's 1991 novel *L'Île des rêves écrasés* (*Island of Shattered Dreams*), which depicts the aftermath of French nuclear testing in Tahiti.

and transpacific consciousness. As discussed in more depth below, colonial views feminize the Pacific and its small island nations as empty, passive, and ahistorical, which preconditions and justifies exploitation. As Pacific scholar Paul Sharrad has observed, gendered descriptions of the Pacific Basin suggest a “passive receptacle” or “something more akin to a sink than a bowl; a container, a vessel that exists to be filled or emptied” (597, 599).³ For Sharrad, the term “basin” turns the Pacific into a void and “naturalizes” various forms of environmental destruction, including dumping nuclear and toxic waste (599). In her first print collection, *Iep Jaltok* (2017), Marshallese poet-activist Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner traces the history of US nuclear testing in the Marshall Islands and exposes the racist and gendered logic that sees the Pacific as an empty basin. Jetñil-Kijiner, a spoken word artist who gained international visibility during her performance at the 2014 Opening Ceremony of the United Nations Secretary-General’s Climate Summit, attaches the global crisis of climate change to colonial legacies of nuclear testing in the Marshall Islands and wider Pacific region. Through her depictions of incremental and accumulative forms of violence, Jetñil-Kijiner depicts both the material and psychic impacts of the militarization of the Pacific.

When viewed in isolation, the experiences of Bikinians and other small populations of the Pacific may appear insignificant on the world stage. However, by connecting the destruction of island homes and Indigenous ways of life to larger threats to the planet, such as climate change, Jetñil-Kijiner shows how the militarization of the islands is not isolated but part of larger global processes. Beyond exposing linkages between different colonial structures, the poet also imagines alternative networks of solidarity. Through Indigenous approaches and aesthetics, Jetñil-Kijiner creates a vision of survival based on communal senses of belonging and interrelationship with the environment.

The Missing Pacific in “Pacific Rim” Discourses

Transpacific scholars have observed how usages of “Pacific,” “Pacific Rim,” and “Asia-Pacific” work to discursively obscure the Pacific Islands. Pacific Islander groups are often subsumed into Asian or Asian American designations, which obfuscates the specific political statuses and investments of Indigenous populations. As Rob Wilson and Arif Dirlik have observed, Pacific Rim discourses routinely ignore the island nations of the “Pacific Basin,” and a number of Pacific Island scholars have discussed the tendency in Asian American studies to “exclude, elide, or appropriate Pacific Island histories and perspectives” (Suzuki 356-7). Commenting on postcolonial scholarship, Setsu Shigematsu and Keith L. Camacho make a similar point in their introduction to *Militarized Currents*: “The Asia-Pacific label is known more for its designation of countries on the Pacific Rim than for countries in the Pacific itself. In this geographical configuration, attention is paid to Pacific Rim countries like Chile, Hong Kong, and Singapore, whereas an examination of countries in the Pacific like Nauru, Fiji, and Samoa is often lacking” (xxx). Whereas the Pacific “Rim” is foregrounded through economic currents and exchange, the Pacific Ocean and its islands recede into a basin of negative space.

3. For more see Jose Rabasa’s “Allegories of the Atlas” in *Inventing A-M-E-R-I-C-A* (1993), which draws out gendered binary oppositions encoded in the Mercator *Atlas*, presenting the “New World” as soft and feminine in contrast to “Old World” masculinity (188). Sharrad’s analysis extends critical discussions of land as feminized by considering land-sea dichotomies and the ways in which water is represented as a void within colonial discourses.

In interrogating the spatial mythology of “rim” and “basin,” I look to three interrelated sets of optics: geographic scale; aerial perspectives; and the dichotomy of “spectacle and secrecy.” The first refers to the privileging of continents over islands, where countries on continents are assumed to be more important, more “worldly,” than island nations (*Archipelagic American Studies* 18). In his 1993 essay, “Our Sea of Islands,” Tongan writer Epeli Hau’ofa contests belittling notions of islands by proposing a vision of inter-island connection through the power of the ocean. The dismissive views of “smallness” addressed by Hau’ofa have also translated into perceptions of island populations and their human value. US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger’s 1969 comment in regard to the future of the US Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands perhaps best exemplifies this sentiment: “There are only 90,000 of them out there. Who gives a damn?” (qtd. in Teaiwa, “Bikinis” 101).

My second lens deals with “air-age globalism,” the rise of aerial technologies during the World Wars and subsequent re-mappings of the globe viewed from above (Taketani 113). Etsuko Taketani argues that the 1940s saw a spatial paradigm shift in which the Mercator projection lost its utility. The Eurocentric maritime map depicts Japan and Hawai’i at opposite ends of the Earth; however, following Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor, post-Mercator aerial maps closed the distance between the two archipelagoes and also “closed up the strategic value of Pacific islands and thus shaped the conduct of the war” (114). The United States used these maps “for the military tactics of island hopping or leapfrogging, building airstrips and integrating the network of military operations with aircraft” (114). While the spatial reordering created through aerial perspectives blurs hemispheric boundaries – calling into question illusory divisions between East and West – Elizabeth DeLoughrey also observes that the aerial view generates a panoptical perspective. In “The Myth of Isolates: Ecosystem Ecologies in the Nuclear Pacific,” DeLoughrey refers to the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) films used to “introduce US viewers to the newly acquired island territories in the Pacific Islands” (168). The views of the islands from military planes re-inscribed ideas of islands as remote and bounded, closed systems isolated from the rest of the world. This myth of “biological and geographical” self-containment helped the AEC to justify “human radiation experiments on Marshall Islanders for 40 [years]” and also obscured the tests’ contamination of the globe (168). DeLoughrey concludes that, because the irradiation of the Pacific Islands was circulated through ocean currents, “we all carry a small piece of that island world in our bones” (179).⁴ Jetñil-Kijiner counters these aerial views of removal and detachment by presenting the view from the ground or sometimes the water line, exposing the bodily impacts of radiation poisoning and climate change in the Marshall Islands.

At the same time, some of these atrocities are common knowledge and yet fail to arouse outrage or action. My third lens, the dichotomy of “spectacle” and “secrecy,” is adapted and extended from i-Kiribati poet-scholar Teresia Teaiwa’s concept of “militourism.” Teaiwa’s neologism, which combines militarism with tourism, describes how “military or paramilitary force ensures the smooth running of a tourist industry, and

4. DeLoughrey explains: “Due to these thermonuclear weapons, the entire planet is permeated with militarized radiation [...]. Radioactive elements produced by these weapons were spread through the atmosphere, deposited into water supplies and soils, absorbed by plants and thus into the bone tissue of humans all over the globe [...]. At very conservative estimates, these nuclear weapons tests have produced 400,000 cancer deaths worldwide” (179).

that same tourist industry masks the military force behind it” (“Reading Paul Gauguin’s *Noa Noa*” 251). Hawai‘i, for example, is known for its beauty and is perceived primarily as a tourist destination, which belies the fact that the archipelago houses one of the largest military arsenals in the world (Ireland). Through the simultaneity of spectacle and secrecy, I consider how the horror of the atom bomb’s mushroom cloud, well-documented by the AEC, both depicts extreme violence and deflects public attention away from its human impact. Though the figure of the blooming mushroom cloud is no secret, the myriad public health and environmental impacts remain relatively unseen. Similar to the way that militourism deflects attention, the simultaneity of spectacle and secrecy is an important descriptor for US military activity in the Pacific: though not outright invisible to international publics, it operates through a kind of slippage. An American viewer might even be overexposed to images of hyper-violence and fail to witness them. Through these three optics of diminishment, detachment, and deflection, I examine how the US rationalized its nuclear testing in the Marshall Islands and continues to downplay the impacts of its military presence in the wider Pacific.

Gender and Geography: Jetñil-Kijiner’s Interrogations of the Pacific “Rim” and “Basin”

Jetñil-Kijiner’s first print collection *Iep Jältok* (2017), published by the University of Arizona Press, appears as part of the Sun Tracks American Indian Literary Series, implicitly connecting the US colonization of Indigenous Pacific Islanders with Native Americans in the continental US. Organized in four parts, the book begins with ancient Marshallese navigator history and mythology in “Iep Jältok,” and the following three sections expose different dimensions of colonial history in the Pacific. “History Project” focuses on the legacy of US nuclear testing in the region, followed by “Lessons from Hawai‘i,” which narrates the experiences of Micronesian migrants in the United States. The final section, “Tell Them,” focuses on the birth of the poet’s daughter and features a number of poems dedicated to global climate change and its particular repercussions on the islands of the Pacific. An introductory note explains that “*Iep jältok (yijip jalteq)*” refers to, “*A basket whose opening is facing the speaker.’ Said of female children. She represents a basket whose contents are made available to her relatives. Also refers to matrilineal society of the Marshallese.*” Throughout the collection, the titular basket serves as a thematic connector. The feminine coding of the basket takes on multiple meanings as the collection progresses, alternating from a site of contestation to one of hope for Marshallese survival.

The collection is framed by two sets of baskets through which the poet interrogates relationships of inner and outer, basin and rim. The opening poem, “Basket,” is shaped in two crescent stanza formations, resembling two baskets facing away from each other. The words in the first stanza arc into a bowl that opens to the right side of the page. The speaker addresses “woman” and invites her to tip the “lid” of her basket so that her offering will spill across the table. The poem progresses as the line of words curves inward with, “you / offer / offer,” and then reaches its base as it dives back into ancestry: “earth / of your / mother” and “roots / of your / father.” The poem describes woman as the conduit connecting past and future, simultaneously acting as the vehicle carrying ancestral history and the producer of the next generation. Through her offering, she generates future history in the form of the next basket “waiting / to be /

woven” (4). The first stanza reads like a prayer of supplication, the repetition of “you / offer / offer” both beckoning and honoring women’s role as cultural producer, conflating the labor of basket weaving with bearing children. The lack of punctuation in the first line, especially the absence of a comma following “woman,” affectively collapses the distance between the poetic speaker and the woman addressed. The presumably woman speaker (given the turn at the end of the poem discussed in the next paragraph) addresses a collective “woman” – speaking both to herself and to the larger communal body of “woman.”

The next stanza which begins on the following page reverses direction, with the opening facing the left side of the page. It begins in the same way, asking the woman to tip her basket to the table, but as her offering descends, it “scrapes / [her] floor” and is interrupted by the question: “bare / vessel?” In the inverse of the previous stanza, the deepest point of the basket is not a reservoir of history but instead a receptacle “with scraps / tossed by / others” (5). As the bowl curves up to the outer rim, the speaker’s address shifts from the collective voice to a first-person point of view. The lowercase lyric “i” closes out the poem with:

i fell asleep
dreamt

my smile
was merely
a rim
woven
into my
face

The introduction of “i” here marks two shifts in the poem: the intersubjective voice morphs into an individual speaker, and the basket metaphor turns from its association with women’s labor to a false smile. She feels the smile as a rim woven into her face, where outer expression does not reflect interior feeling. The poem gestures at social pressures on women to suppress complaint and appear happy even for strangers.

Jetñil-Kijiner’s examination of the gendered meanings attached to the Marshallese basket uncannily mirrors analyses of Asia-Pacific Rim and Basin discourse. On the one hand, the feminization or emptying of the Pacific, as pointed out by Sharrad, is the language of erasure, collapsing the Pacific into an undifferentiated Asia; on the other, it serves as justification for making use of the space for colonial purposes, be it dumping nuclear waste, testing weapons, or launching foreign wars. In “Basket,” Jetñil-Kijiner plays with these reversals through her performance and re-performance of the basket shape itself. The basket’s duality intersects with gendered discourses of the Pacific along multiple axes: Basin and Rim, secrecy and spectacle, interior and exterior, passive receptacle and sovereign vessel. The dichotomy also speaks to differences between Eurocentric and Polynesian cultural frameworks. In Polynesian traditions, as explained by Sharrad, the void is not seen as a space of “sterile absence and vacancy, but as a source of creative, living potential” (603). In Jetñil-Kijiner’s depiction, the basket’s rim marks a separation between public and private spheres and between different cultural perspectives on the Pacific “void.” At the poem’s conclusion, the rim, embodied as a woman’s pained smile, mystifies and makes her labor disappear from the public space of cultural production. For Jetñil-Kijiner, the basket’s shape becomes the site to explore

women's social role: the same basket that bears an ancestral offering can be hollowed to a container, and her act of offering can be reduced to mere servitude.

Though Jetnīl-Kijiner is primarily a spoken word performer, the print page allows her to dramatize the basket's relationship to the female body through her play with textual lineation, which resonates with the visual nature of her work and the emphasis on visual expression in Pacific Island cultures. As Teaiwa explains, Pacific literary histories that emphasize the introduction of writing as a *new* technology obscure "a sophisticated Indigenous understanding of the visual" ("What Remains" 731). Though these histories often refer to the deep tradition of orature in the Pacific, hierarchical views that frame oral culture as outmoded and print as modern often undergird narratives of postcolonial Pacific literature. Instead, Teaiwa asks us to consider the visual roots of Pacific cultures and ancient technologies analogous to writing, such as the *lalava* bindings found throughout Pacific architecture and canoes. The various patterns of *lalava* lashings that were used to bind beams can also be broken down into symbols "equivalent of linguistic morphemes" (735). Teaiwa's interventions trouble notions that the Pacific Islands have belatedly entered "modernity" through the advent of print literature in English, but they also claim Indigenous practices of binding or weaving as a form of writing. Jetnīl-Kijiner's *iep jāltok* gathers together these various strands: without an understanding of Pacific cultural history, the communal values embedded in the basket's interlaced fibers are lost. Representing both lineage and ancient practices of weaving passed down across generations, the basket is the site of both individual embodiment and communal subjectivity.

"Most Marshallese / can say they've mastered the language of cancer": Slow Violence in Bikini Atoll (40)

Over the course of the Cold War, the US launched over 65 atomic tests, but as scientific studies show, the 1954 detonation of the *Bravo* hydrogen bomb is responsible for the bulk of enduring radiation in the region and, consequently, lasting public health risks. In fact, the single event marks the highest dose of nuclear fallout in the history of worldwide nuclear testing: over fifty years after *Bravo*'s explosion, scientists project lasting health implications, with "increased cancer risk as the primary late health effect of exposure" (Simon *et al.* 48). *Bravo*'s blast, which, unlike previous tests, fused rather than split atoms, "eviscerated three islands in the Bikini Atoll" and is thought to have been nearly one thousand times more powerful than the US bombing in Hiroshima (Keown 936). Islanders inhabiting the islands of Rongelap and Rongerik, who were not informed of the detonation, were exposed to the fallout when wind carried the radioactive dust that descended like snow over isles (Niedenthal). Twenty-three Japanese fishermen aboard the *Lucky Dragon* were also exposed to fallout (Simon *et al.* 52). The catastrophe created an international media scandal; however, reports focused on the men aboard the *Lucky Dragon*, ignoring the Marshallese exposed in the immediate aftermath of the detonation and then through contaminated soil, water, and vegetation in the years that followed (Keown 936; Simon *et al.* 50).

In her analysis of *Iep Jāltok*'s critique of US imperialism, Pacific literary scholar Michelle Keown reads the *Lucky Dragon* incident through eco-critic Rob Nixon's theory of "slow violence." Nixon describes "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attrition-

al violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (2). Slow violence includes radiation poisoning and radioactive fallout, deforestation, climate change, and other environmental catastrophes that unevenly impact the environments of the "poor" and are often discounted by Western nuclear powers. Keown sees the invisibility of the disastrous trans-generation effects of nuclear testing on the Marshallese people as a key illustration of slow violence. While the *Lucky Dragon* incident created international outrage, the decades of radiation-related epidemics in the Marshall Islands remain "largely ignored and suppressed by the United States" (938). Keown writes, "There was a flurry of international media attention at the time of the BRAVO bomb due to the radiation exposure of the Japanese fishing crew, but the long-term effects of radiation and displacement upon the Marshallese have barely been registered outside the Indigenous community" (938). In terms of US narrative, Hiroshima represents a singular event, justified as a once and necessary act, while more chronic and structural nuclear events in the Marshall Islands are conveniently left unremembered.

By considering the spectacle / secrecy dichotomy evoked by Jetñil-Kijiner's basket trope, I extend Keown's analysis by further investigating the dilemma of representation raised by Nixon. Like Sharrad's interrogation of the basin / rim binary, Nixon's descriptions of slow violence ring with gendered language. Nixon observes that global media tend to privilege the visual ("If it bleeds, it leads"), which creates a representational bias against violence that is not bound by an explosive event or action (16). In addition, stories told by "people whose witnessing authority is culturally discounted" remain unheard or, as I argue in regard to Jetñil-Kijiner, constitute an open secret, a form of structural violence that becomes normalized as inevitable. While slow violence in its various manifestations may be too diffuse or incremental to raise alarms when viewed in isolation, Jetñil-Kijiner forces her audience to bear witness by connecting structures of slow violence. Events in isolation might not register in the public eye or can be disregarded, but when viewed constellationally, their impacts cannot be ignored. Jetñil-Kijiner connects the bodily horrors of radiation poisoning and cancer experienced by the Marshallese with events of nuclear disaster, global climate change, and the reality of sinking islands in the Pacific.

In the eight-part poem "Fishbone Hair," Jetñil-Kijiner narrates her niece Bianca's chronic illness and eventual death from leukemia. Each of the eight short sections offers a glimpse into Bianca's life at various stages of illness, and throughout the poem, the grieving speaker is left to consider the physical facts of the child's disembodied hair and bones. These recurring references to "rootless hair" and "bones" creates a resonance of trauma that speaks to multiple senses of loss. The first section begins with the discovery of "two ziplocks / stuffed / with rolls and rolls of hair" inside Bianca's old room (24). The speaker considers the plastic bags with a rush of undifferentiated similes: "dead as a doornail black as a tunnel hair thin / as strands of tumbling seaweed." The lack of punctuation or syntactical separation between the metaphors adds a propulsive quality, as though the speaker is trying to make sense of the contents of the bags before she settles on "strands of tumbling seaweed." She wonders whether her sister stashed the bags in an attempt "to save that / rootless hair / that hair without a home" (24). Keown reads this reference to homelessness as evoking the experience of "exile of the nuclear nomads of the northern atolls" (943). In this way, the rolls of hair represent both the individual experience of child cancer as well as the wider experience of nuclear refugees

in the Marshall Islands. As the poem progresses, the connections between Bianca's illness and the legacy of military colonialism in the region become more evident.

In the next section, the speaker explains that a war had been "raging" in her niece's six-year-old bones. She describes the white cells as colonizers who "staked their flag" and "conquered the territory of her tiny body" (25). The white cells double for American invaders, who see their takeover as a reflection of destiny. Bianca's body is the territory through which the ideology of Manifest Destiny reaches its culmination, and the final phrase drifts down the page like the loose strands of hair it references:

It
all
fell
out (25)

In a later section, after shifting in time to moments before and after Bianca's death, the poem alludes to *Bravo's* detonation as experienced by the *Lucky Dragon* fishermen. After watching the explosion splitting the sky, the speaker explains, the fishermen were quiet, and perhaps most tellingly, "they were neat." After dusting the fallout from their hair, they "turned around their motorboat and speeded home" (29). In contrast to Bianca's rootless hair, the Japanese fishermen are able to return home and leave the incident behind them. In reality, the fishermen suffered from radiation poisoning, but the description of neatness and "dusting off" emphasizes that the event was isolated for the fishermen, whereas the Marshallese people have been displaced in their own home.

In the final two sections, the poem turns its grief into a potential for solidarity. The coils of hair become the material for nets. The speaker recalls a Chamorro legend in which the women of Guåhan (Guam) weave their long hair into nets to save their island from a monstrous fish. In the closing section, the words are scattered across the page, but this time, they do not evoke falling strands of hair but, instead, a woven net. The arrangement of "fishbone hair" among the nodes of words, "catch," "ash," "catch," "moon," "catch," "star," also resembles an astral constellation, thus calling back to the Indigenous navigator poems at the start of the collection and the ancient sailors who used the stars as guide. The shape also simultaneously suggests a network of islands: the references to Guåhan, another island under US military occupation, creates a trans-oceanic cultural link, and the net suggests Indigenous collaboration and resistance against a common oppressor. The net of words, the poem concludes, is "for you Bianca / for you" (31).

"For the good of humankind": Universalizing Discourses in the Face of Ecological Catastrophe

In the poem "History Project," Jetñil-Kijiner describes a school project she conducted at the age of fifteen to research the history of nuclear testing in the Marshall Islands. The poem layers discourses of political and military jargon (including Kissinger's dismissal: "90,000 people out there. *Who / gives a damn?*") with the lived horrors of the nuclear aftermath, including accounts of pervasive miscarriages and infant death as a result of radiation: "jelly babies / tiny beings with no bones / skin – red as tomatoes" (20). Recounting the initial 1946 removal of Bikini Islanders from their atoll, the speaker remembers her "islander ancestors, cross-legged / before a general listening / to his

fairly tale” (21). The general here refers to Commodore Ben Wyatt, who convinced the Bikinians to temporarily evacuate their home so that the US could begin nuclear testing “for the good of mankind” (Niedenthal). The Bikinians were resettled in the nearby Rongerik Atoll, where they found an insufficient food and water supply and suffered from starvation. They were never able to return home as Bikini remains uninhabitable today, and the displaced Bikinians, who dispersed to Kili and other Marshall Islands, continue to struggle with limited food and resources. Because of irradiation, traditional practices of fishing are no longer viable, which has forced dependency on imported industrialized foods (Niedenthal). Highlighting the irony of Wyatt’s statement, the fifteen-year-old speaker of the poem titles her history project, “FOR THE GOOD OF MANKIND” (23). She submits it to a district-wide competition, but the three white judges miss the bitter joke.

As the collection progresses, Jetñil-Kijiner begins connecting these narratives of radiation-related displacement to those of climate change refugees in the Pacific. In “Tell Them,” the speaker urges her friends in the US to tell others about the Marshall Islands. She describes flooding cemeteries and water crashing over sea walls (66). “Tell them,” she demands, “what it’s like / to see the entire ocean_level_with the land” (66). The underscores around “level” visually invoke the surface of water enveloping the land. Those in the US who are not immediately impacted by the reality of rising sea levels have the luxury of complacency, while Marshall Islanders witness the difference that a matter of inches can make. In the poem, “Two Degrees,” in particular, the poet weighs these perceptions of scale as she links two forms of slow violence: radiation poisoning and global warming. She begins by describing her one-year-old daughter sick with fever. She thinks about the difference only a few degrees can make, the difference between life and death, and she extends this thought to scientists’ warning that two degrees’ difference in the Earth’s temperature will mean global catastrophe: “at 2 degrees my islands / will already be under water” (77). She considers minimizing views of the Marshall Islands, which from an outside perspective must look like “just crumbs you / dust off the table” (78), which recalls French president Charles de Gaulle’s sweeping description of the Caribbean Islands as crumbs: “Between Europe and America I see only specks of dust” (qtd. in Glissant n.p.). The poem describes patients in a clinic on Kili island, “with a nuclear history threaded / into their bloodlines,” who awake to a rushing tide flooding the hospital (78). A “sewage of syringes and gauze” floats in the sea water (78). In the midst of the wreckage, the poet explains the aim of her poetic project, that she writes to put faces on the numbers and statistics, to dramatize the human toll of climate change so often obscured by political discourse. “There are faces . . .” she reminds us, “not yet / under water” (79).

Jetñil-Kijiner’s depiction of shrinking islands and the unequal experience and witnessing of climate change’s impact speaks to recent debates about the future of postcolonial study in a warming world. As scientists take stock of the human impact on the global climate and designate the current era as the Anthropocene, human beings have been refigured as a geological force with the power to control geologic history. In “Postcolonial Studies and the Challenge of Climate Change” (2012), Dipesh Chakrabarty argues for a new conception of the human subject in the face of potential apocalypse. He contends, “The fact that the crisis of climate change will be routed through all our ‘anthropological differences’” – meaning differences of class, race, sexuality, gender, and so on

– “can only mean that, however anthropogenic the current global warming may be in its origins, there is no corresponding ‘humanity’ that in its oneness can act as a political agent” (14). While Chakrabarty’s vision proposes a united human community mobilized to save the species, Benita Parry’s withering critique points out that responsibility for massing greenhouse gasses and its effects are not evenly distributed across humanity. Instead, Parry observes, Chakrabarty’s transcendent view displaces discussions of the intersecting roles of global capitalism and imperialism in climate change. By ignoring “the logic of capitalist accumulation on a world scale producing environmental crises,” she writes, Chakrabarty positions global warming as a “transcendental force outside an actually existing world order” (347). In other words, the climate crisis is staged as separate from rather than imbricated in global socioeconomic disparity.

A reductive take on this debate might frame “anthropological differences,” class struggle, and identity politics as irrelevant in the face of impending global threat. Perhaps unexpectedly (and in sharp contrast to Chakrabarty’s transcendent vision), medievalist scholar Jeffrey Jerome Cohen suggests that a deeper engagement with “unequally distributed suffering” is needed to mobilize against global warming. Cohen connects current fears of a submerged world to another apocalypse story, the biblical myth of Noah’s ark. He attributes complacent attitudes about climate change to a western cultural fantasy that allows us to retreat from responsibility – we return, Cohen argues, to the promise of an “ark” that will inevitably save some but not all, a presentist view that ignores the complex history of the Noah myth. Images of a drowned Earth that emerge with the term “Anthropocene” deploy the “god trick,” an aerial view that has the “effect of objectivity” as it gazes down at the Earth from a distance (Rabasa 186). Meanwhile, the “arkive” of medieval illustrations and numerous retellings of Noah’s flood across centuries offer a more complicated picture: a view from below that shows the faces of those who have been lost, corpses of human and nonhuman life mingling together in the waters. This change of perspective – from a transcendent, totalizing view to an engagement with the material impacts of climate change – works against fatalism. Instead, the possibility for a human community emerges through a reckoning with uneven suffering rather than an escape from it.

Countering Commodore Wyatt’s “fairy tale” vision of a united humanity, Jetñil-Kijiner presents concerns for the good of mankind as inseparable from the life of the planet in “Dear Matafele Peinam.” The poem, which was originally performed at the 2014 Opening Ceremony of the United Nations Secretary-General’s Climate Summit, is dedicated to the poet’s daughter at the age of seven months and wonders what future world awaits her, one where she “will wander / rootless”? (70) The speaker pledges to her daughter that she will not allow her to become a “climate change refugee” (71). She pledges to fight, even though there are those who like to “pretend / that we don’t exist” (72). As identified by the invocation of “we,” she begins in the Pacific Islands but ripples out to wider geographies: “the Philippines” and “Pakistan, Algeria, Colombia,” impacted by floods, typhoons, and earthquakes (72). Like the net at the end of “Fishbone Hair,” which suggests Indigenous Pacific solidarity, Jetñil-Kijiner’s geographies here also create a trans-ethnic and trans-cultural collaborative network, but this time, one that encompasses other Global Souths beyond the Pacific region. She issues a call to resist and reassures her daughter that there are already “canoes blocking coal ships,” referring to Indigenous protests against resource exploitation (72). Also

significant is the poet's emphasis on feminine lineage, as she considers her daughter, her granddaughter, and her great granddaughter, reinforcing the book's epigraph, "Girls continue the lineage," and culminating in the collection's final poem (70).

The last poem is a mirror image of the first; also titled "Basket," it presents two curving stanza formations identical to the opening poem. In the first stanza, however, when the woman tips her basket, her offering finds:

a seabed
to scrape
a receptacle
to dump
with scraps

your
body
is a country
we conquer
and devour (80)

Her body, like Bianca's, is a country or territory to conquer and an empty vessel in which to dump waste. Yet, though "we / take," she continues to give. The following stanza of the next page is an inverse of the first, and the two curving baskets face each other to form a circle. This time, when the woman tips her basket, she creates "a lineage / of sand" and "a reef / of memory" (81). The speaker affirms that her "womb" is "the sustainer / of life," and when the lyric "I" appears, capitalized in contrast to the lowercase "i" of the first poem, the speaker dreams that her words flow out "to greet you" (81).

Reversing the colonial view that evacuates Pacific history, Jetñil-Kijiner presents the basin as a vessel to carry and sustain life, connecting past memory with future lineage. Co-extensive with the environment, the human body is entangled with both sand and reef. In contrast to the image of both the body and the environment as territory to "conquer / and devour," the poet concludes the collection by imagining the basket as open and overflowing with offering, not a mere receptacle but a vessel to carry future history.

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