

# SISTERS OF OCEAN AND ICE

On the Hydro-feminism of Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner and Aka Niviâna's  
*Rise: From One Island to Another*

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**ABSTRACT:** The video poem *Rise: From One Island to Another*, a 2018 collaboration between Marshallese poet Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner and Inuk poet Aka Niviâna from Kalaallit Nunaat (Greenland) raises key questions about the antimonies of climate mitigation and adaptation discourses across oceans and islands. As “sisters of ocean and ice,” the poets reference the climate relationships between ice melt in Greenland and sea inundation of the Marshall Islands as part of the extended, but differentiated, island colonial histories of occupation, militarism, and development. Having been brought together by environmental activist organisation 350.org, Jetñil-Kijiner and Niviâna also strategically use their positionalities as Indigenous islanders to critique not only the continuity between colonial and neo-liberal operations but also the continuity between colonial and environmental scopic regimes, that taken together, stymie climate change imaginaries. In response to these discourses, they claim a feminist hydro-ontological imaginary. Ultimately, the video poem allows an examination of the value of materialist hydro-feminisms and “feminism without borders” (Mohanty, 2003) to extend Island Studies frameworks of the aquapelagic—the assemblage of human interactivity with sea, land, and sky.

**KEYWORDS:** Marshall Islands, Greenland, Climate Change, Climate Mitigation, Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner, Aka Niviâna, feminism, environmental art

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“Sister of ice and snow, I’m coming to you ... Sister of ocean and sand, I welcome you.” This opening line from the video poem *Rise: From One Island to Another*, disseminated through the environmental activist organisation 350.org’s social media platform, invokes an Indigenous transoceanic solidarity between Marshallese poet Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner and Inuk poet Aka Niviâna from *Kalaallit Nunaat*/Greenland. As the camera captures Jetñil-Kijiner standing in water just off the shores of Majuro island in the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) and offers soaring views of Niviâna walking on the melting icecaps of Greenland, the poets’ woven spoken-word performances reference the climate relationships between sea inundation and ice melt on their respective islands. While the imagery of the video lends itself to exoticised tropes of islands and islanders as disappearing (Farbotko, 2010; Korber, 2017: 158), the poets speak otherwise. In many cases, the imagery offers the poets a strong foil against which to assert a sisterhood of ocean and ice. In what follows I ask what the importance of claiming a sisterhood of ocean and ice—what I will articulate as a feminist

hydro-ontological imaginary (Te Punga Somerville, 2012; Neimanis, 2017; Harris, 2015)—might be, especially in response to the global transformations of the climate *and* climate representation.

Figure 1 – Video still from Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner and Aka Niviâna, *Rise: From One Island to Another* (2018) with permission from 350.org, Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner and Aka Niviâna and Dan Lin.



Funded and launched by 350.org, *Rise* was part of the larger Rise for Climate campaign that sought to mobilise a climate justice movement worldwide—820 actions in 91 countries. With video campaigns, protests, and other actions orchestrated around the world in September 2018 culminating in the Global Climate Action Summit in San Francisco, it marked a new visibility for a global climate justice perspective: to bring “frontline” communities (350.org) together around the world with a specific demand for leadership to keep carbon in the ground and work toward a fossil free-economy. In recent years, 350.org has created viral social media campaigns to bridge transnational environmentalism and grassroots activism, striving to develop forms of belonging in an era of globalisation. As such, it is an “eco-cosmopolitan” (Heise, 2008) platform that at times essentialises specific local environmental concerns, plays into exoticising tropes of those “frontline” communities, while also enabling connections across translocal groups. This dynamic is evident in the making of *Rise*.

Since 2014, Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner has been a leading figure in representing Pacific island states fighting for climate justice. She was selected to speak at the 2014 opening ceremony of the United Nations Secretary General’s Climate Summit and again asked to speak at the Conference of Parties (COP) 21 in Paris in 2015. Her visibility on these NGO platforms is partly due to her position in the Marshall Islands—as the daughter of politician Dr Hilda Heine (currently the first woman president of the Republic of the Marshall Islands), as an emerging poet and artist publishing and exhibiting in English-speaking venues, and as co-founder of the non-profit Jo-Jikum, dedicated to empowering the voices of Marshallese youth to seek climate justice. In 2015, she was highlighted as a female “climate warrior,” in *Vogue* magazine (Russell, 2015). The tensions between recognition and exotification present in

these frameworks led her in 2017 to begin developing spoken word performances that would reclaim the racialised and gendered perception of female “climate warriors.” As part of a Smithsonian arts and culture summit in Honolulu in 2017, she and three other Pacific women developed a spoken word performance that highlighted the impacts of colonialism and capitalism on representations of Pacific women.<sup>1</sup>

For Jetnīl-Kijiner, the *Rise* campaign for 350.org, coordinated with a number of Pacific Pawa group actions across the Pacific, offered another complicated opportunity to cultivate solidarity beyond borders (Jetnīl-Kijiner, 2018). The poet first travelled with seventeen other Pacific Climate Warriors to Germany in order to submit a petition to stop its coal mining operations (ibid). Recognising Jetnīl-Kijiner’s regional climate justice work and international reputation, Bill McKibben, co-founder of 350.org, asked her to participate in making a video poem about climate change that would be featured as part of the global *Rise* social media campaign. He invited Jetnīl-Kijiner to visit the melting glacial waters of Greenland with him and glaciologist Jason Box. Before making the trip with McKibben and Box, and most likely understanding how her identity position would be framed, Jetnīl-Kijiner asked to be put in touch with an Inuit poet sharing her concerns.<sup>2</sup> Box introduced Jetnīl-Kijiner to Aka Niviāna, a young poet whom he had met at a Copenhagen climate protest. Niviāna, part of an artist activist movement addressing colonial legacies in Greenland, had been making poems that specifically addressed the current debates about resource extraction as part of that colonial legacy (Niviāna 2018). Her views resonated with Jetnīl-Kijiner’s interest in parallel colonial continuities on RMI.

Having been brought together through this transnational framework to fight for a “fossil-free” economy, and very aware of how their positions as Indigenous women might be used to frame the issues of climate change, Jetnīl-Kijiner and Niviāna created a poem that could address the legacies of colonialism, while at the same time, negotiate the politics and imagery of contemporary climate representation with their performance and voice. In other words, they sought to find agency in what has often been called the double-bind of the artist-as-ethnographer (Foster, 1995; Fisher, 1996), when non-white artists, asked to speak for and about one’s culture on global platforms, have a new visibility, but also a newly objectified position. In this essay I will address how the poets strategically use their positionalities within eco-cosmopolitan spaces of representation like 350.org in order to critique not only the continuity between colonial and neo-liberal operations (Gómez-Barris, 2017; Shiva, 2002; Goodyear-Ka’ōpua, 2012), but also the continuity between colonial and environmental scopic regimes (DeLoughrey, 2019; Demos, 2016). I will discuss how the poets organise their poetic addresses, first toward each other, and then toward multiple audiences in ways that build toward moments of self-conscious intervention in the environmental tropes of crisis, disaster and nostalgia.

Beyond identifying the poets’ critical interventions, I will also discuss how their feminist hydro-ontological perspective—of ocean and ice—strategically connects their struggles and offers an immersive space for complexifying climate representation and imagining future possibility (Yussoff and Gabrys, 2001). In this respect, I see their feminist hydro-ontologies engaging in relational Island Studies’ turn toward the global climate (Pugh, 2018). In his recent assessment of relational island studies in the Anthropocene, Jonathan Pugh argues for

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<sup>1</sup> The performance for Smithsonian ‘*Ae Kai: Culture Lab on Convergence*’ was held in Honolulu in July 2017. It featured Jocelyn Ng, Kathy Jetnīl-Kijiner, Terisa Siagatonu and Jahra ‘Rager’ Wasasala.

<sup>2</sup> Kathy Jetnīl-Kijiner explains the making of the poem in the videos *Making of Rise: Ethos* and *Making of Rise: Poem*.

an understanding of the relative nature of island vulnerabilities and the politics of resiliency in the overlapping temporalities of climate change (ibid; see also Kelman, 2018; Kelman and Weichselgartner, 2015). Indeed, the geopolitical comparisons between Greenland and the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) are exemplary here. Although they are both often used as iconic island tropes at the forefront of the climate imaginary (DeLoughrey, 2019; Ziser and Sze, 2007; Körber, 2017; Schneider and Nocke, 2007), they have differing stakes in climate justice discussions. RMI currently faces regular flooding, water shortages, and continued nuclear contamination issues from US atomic testing during the Cold War. Its status as a COFA (Compact of Free Association) treaty state, still in many ways tied to the US, also informs official discourses of adaptation and mitigation. In recent years, discussions of climate migration have met with resistance (Rudiak-Gould, 2013; Burkett, 2014) and new discussions are centered around NGO-sponsored engineering and land reclamation projects to raise the archipelago's infrastructure and even build new islands (Jetnīl-Kijiner, 2019). Greenland's government, facing rapid ice melt, thawing permafrost and increased navigability of Arctic waters, is considering how to manage its natural resources (over which it gained sovereignty under the 2009 Self Government Act), especially oil and uranium (Markussen, 2017: 306). With multinational companies and foreign governments seeking mining opportunities in Greenland, the government is considering how to responsibly manage these resources in a way that balances economic growth (which would strengthen its sovereignty in relation to Denmark), consideration for Greenlandic traditional ways of life (Rud, 2017: 135), and climate change mitigation. These are necessarily broad-brush overviews, but they begin to explain nuanced relations and attitudes toward conversations about global carbon emissions policies in climate change and climate justice across islands and oceans.

I'm interested in the ways that Jetnīl-Kijiner and Niviāna, as artists working to create new imaginaries about climate change in relation to their islands and beyond, bring the issues back to feminist embodied relationships with and through water. Figuring their bodies as part of the rising water, not victims of it, their "feminism without borders" (Mohanty 2003, 1) offers an alternative to climate discussions that still operate within implicit capitalist, nationalist, and power-elite frameworks (Bond and Dorsey, 2010; Adamson et al, 2002). The poets do not claim to speak for all of the constituents of their respective island homes, but instead perform direct conversation (in the form of poetic address) with each other so as to break open hegemonic discourses. To summarise the implicit arc of their concern, which I will unfold in more detail below: the problem of climate change is not (simply) inundation by or the melting of water, but their respective communities' "submersion" (Gómez-Barris 2017) and invisibility (Simmons 2019; Tall Bear 2014) in colonial-capital processes—histories of empire that have already impacted and continue to impact their particular geographies, societies, and imaginaries that now also ripple through discourses of green capitalism (Harcourt and Nelson, 2015; Whyte, 2017) and carbon trading (Liverman 2009), and that do not fully acknowledge the uneven distribution of risks and benefits for their communities. As a further concern, they have to attend to the ways that eco-cosmopolitanism frames their claims to visibility. An Indigenous feminist embodied performativity of rising becomes key to negotiating these various discursive and scopic frameworks. I will articulate this in terms of an hydro-ontology by way of extending island studies frameworks of the aquapelagic—the assemblage of human interactivity with sea, land, and sky (Hayward, 2012)—to include new discussions of materialist hydro-feminisms and feminist solidarity.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> I also take a cue here from Karides (2017).

*With these shells I bring a story of long ago...With these rocks I bring/ a story told countless times*



Figure 2 – Video still from Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner and Aka Niviâna, *Rise: From One Island to Another* (2018) with permission from 350.org, Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner and Aka Niviâna and Dan Lin.

In explaining the initial concept for the *Rise* video poem on a documentary video available on 350.org, Bill McKibben said, “I wanted to have that image for the world of someone standing on top of the water that would drown their home when it melted.”<sup>4</sup> The final video, directed by Dan Lin and funded and launched by 350.org, does indeed gesture to that image. As a cello track plays on the soundtrack, Jetñil-Kijiner sits on Greenland’s rocky shoreline and then stands in a boat (Figure 2), all the while looking at icebergs as they meet the ocean. Other shots also feature soaring views of the two poets isolated, but surrounded by the stunning environmentalist imagery of glacial meltwaters of Greenland and the Pacific waters surrounding the Marshall Islands. In these particular ways, the video relies on common visual climate tropes of islanders as “ventriloquists for the western crisis of nature,” (Farbotko and Lazrus, 2012: 383). In speaking about the emergence of such imagery, especially in Pacific Islands climate documentaries, Elizabeth DeLoughrey has named this “salvage environmentalism,” in which “Pacific Islanders as the harbingers of climate change, [are] habitually rendered as figures of an isolated, natural and nature-loving culture that were being appropriated to critique American petrocapi-talism” (2017: 189). She mentions *Paradise Drowned: Tuvalu, the Disappearing Nation* (O’Connor, Middleton and Tourell, 2001) and *The Hungry Tide* (Zubrycki, 2011). There is also *The Island President* about the Maldives (Guggenheim, 2009), and more recently, *Anote’s Ark* (Rytz, 2018) about sea level rise in Kiribati. In Greenland, similar tropes can be found in *Silent Snow* (van den Berg, 2011). DeLoughrey draws on a range of visual critical analyses of environmentalism and climate change representation to describe the tropes used in these films: from Susan Sontag’s ‘Aesthetics of Disaster’ (1966) to more recent essays such as Julie Doyle’s ‘Picturing the clima(c)tic’ (2007). Jodi Dean also points out that environmental art’s breathtaking beauty

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<sup>4</sup> McKibben speaking in the video *Rise: The Journey*.

and access to relative “remoteness” of places is often used to create a sense of awe, emotional connection and “fascination” with nature’s endangerment for Western audiences (Dean, 2016). Emily Eliza Scott, in ‘Archives of the Present-Future’ (2017), has followed with a discussion of how the beauty of climate disaster ends up aestheticising the landscape and masking what is ultimately a dispassionate, and technological view, creating a passive consumer experience for the viewer.

Evident in these films is also a documentary impulse often focusing the audience’s affectivity on emotionally heart wrenching stories of loss and dispossession at a distance from their lives. As Pooja Rangan has argued in *Immediations* (which also draws on Sontag’s 2003 essay *Regarding the Pain of Others*), humanitarian documentary styles “suggest how disenfranchised humanity is repeatedly enlisted and commodified to corroborate documentary’s privileged connection with the real” (2018: 2). Rangan’s discussion can also be positioned within histories of racialised and paternalistic undertones of the ethnographic gaze tied to imperial power (Said, 1989; Rosaldo, 1989). As Renato Rosaldo argues, “there is a particular kind of nostalgia, often found under imperialism, where people mourn the passing of what they themselves have transformed” (ibid: 108). The feminine body has long been a privileged trope in these images. There are established visual histories in the Pacific in which women have represented the innocence, purity and availability of entire cultures (Tamaira, 2010; see also Jolly, 1997). As tropes of exploration have turned toward eco-cosmopolitan narratives of environmental mourning that same innocence is now re-figured as a virginity lost.

And yet, there are ways in which artists are intervening in these tropes, contrapuntal systems of representation and reception that can shift or rupture these scopic regimes, even from within them (Tamaira, 2010; Demos, 2013 and 2016; Scott, 2017; Azoulay, 2008). In *Rise*, this is evident in how the poets use their bodies and words, and more specifically the affectivity of their voices, their gazes towards each other, and then directly into the camera—all obviously scripted—to respond self-consciously to their exotified, but nonetheless agential, position within the eco-cosmopolitan scopic regime. While their actions cannot escape the frame of *Rise*’s salvage environmental or humanitarian documentary gaze (indeed their address to each other could be read as a trope of intimacy and immediacy), it should also be read as multivalent performance. Identity is always strategic, embodied, and in relation (Mohanty, 2003: 6). Perhaps there is a performance of Indigeneity for a global audience. Yet there is also a performance (or what Jetñil-Kijiner calls a ritual—more about this later) of direct relating between the two poets. The film can act as a communicative medium between them, *and for them*, as much as for the 350.org audience (who also should not be seen as completely homogenised).

The poem begins with a ritual exchange of shells carried by Jetñil-Kijiner and stones carried by Niviãna (Figure 3). Stones and shells, activated by their stories, become metonyms, like ocean and ice, of a genealogical oceanic assemblage that orients their relation and obligation to each other. Jetñil-Kijiner explains her gift in relation to her story about two sisters “seen at the edge of the reef.”



Figure 3 – Video still from Kathy Jetn̄il-Kijiner and Aka Niviāna, *Rise: From One Island to Another* (2018) with permission from 350.org, Kathy Jetn̄il-Kijiner and Aka Niviāna and Dan Lin.

She summarises the legend, known as ‘Ao Aorōk In Io ,kwe’:

*The legend features sisters from Ujae who loved and respected each other very much. One day they decided to have a juggling competition around the entire island. They began their juggling competition – when the eldest reached a certain spot by the edge of the reef, she dropped the shells rock [sic] she was juggling, and she suddenly turned into stone. The younger sister, who was following close behind, noticed this strangely shaped rock—when she came closer, she saw that it was her sister. In her grief, she decided to drop the rock she was juggling as well, choosing to turn to stone, so she could stay by her sister’s side. The moral of the story is the love that connected the two sisters.*

As she recounts in the documentation for the video, it took effort, with the help of teachers and cultural practitioners, to find, slowly read, and understand this story. In describing the whole process, she de-essentialises her relation to Marshallese language and traditional knowledge while also emphasising her specific reasons for reactivating the story with new resonances. As in many of poems collected in Jetn̄il-Kijiner’s first book of poetry, *Iep Jāltok*, the imagery, and mythological figures she chooses for *Rise* emphasise the matrilineal heritage of the Marshall Islands.<sup>5</sup> In this particular story, the sisters express their love and commitment to each other in staying steadfast, becoming part of the very foundation of the islands themselves. In the video, the story is paired with images of children clinging to eroded structures on the coral reef of a shoreline. While this imagery tends to rely, as discussed above, on tropes of paradise and islander inundation, Jetn̄il-Kijiner’s voice powerfully confronts them with her “lesson in permanence”—a story of deep time that both reaches into a past before humans, while also projecting an Indigenous future in which the two sisters, as

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<sup>5</sup> For more on the potential of this strategy by Pacific artists, see Taimara (2010) and Schwartz (2012).

rock instead of flesh, will still reside in the Pacific. The pairing of image and text accentuates a common strategy in Jetn̄il-Kijiner's work: to confront narratives of disaster, rootlessness and forced migration with an ontological connection to the land and ocean scape. The female body is generated by and in turn generates water, stone, pandanus leaf, or reef in many of her poems (Keown, 2017). In the case of *Rise*, the sisters become the stone of the island, and in so becoming, they cannot be washed away from it. They *are* aspects of the island.

Niviāna's story focuses on Sassuma Arnaa, Mother of the Sea. In many Inuit legends, Sassuma Arnaa lives deep in an underwater cave and her fingers become the seals, walrus and whales that populate the Arctic waters. Known as a powerful and vengeful goddess, whalers and hunters have given gifts so that she releases animals from the sea for them (Moss, 1997). As the creator and protector of these animals, Sassuma Arnaa has provided a mode of relating to and respecting the icescape over centuries of Inuit subsistence. As Niviāna relates the myth, the filmmakers focus their camera on a sculpture of the goddess made by Christian Nuunu Rosing installed on low-lying rocks just off the coast of Nuuk, the capital city of Greenland. Shot at high tide with a close focus on the sculpture, the cinematography dramatises the relationship of the stone figure to the power of the sea.

Both stories lend power to the voices and bodies of the poets in their respective landscapes, establishing their rootedness to land, which is immersed in the ocean that connects them. In both stories, water is not spoken of as a corrosive or destructive force acting upon stone and shell but instead as part of the same interacting and interrelated "aquapalagic" (Hayward 2012) environment that has taught and been shaped by generations in Jetn̄il-Kijiner and Niviāna's respective communities of situated knowledges and lifeways.

Not claiming to speak for the artists' own "analytics of existence" (Povinelli, 2016: 27) and respecting my lack of knowledge about their respective oral traditions, I will not further engage the meaning of these stories in relation to the poet's respective cultures. What is important to address however, is that together the poets employ their genealogical relationship to the ocean in response to and within the transnational space of social media, and in English. Feminist theorist Elizabeth Povinelli (2016) has called this geo-ontological power, a strength coming from *geos*, the earth, that both describes contemporary "late Liberal governance" of geology as resource, commodity and property (even its governance of the Indigene's ontological relationship with geology), while also problematising it from within (ibid: 16). In other words, while Jetn̄il-Kijiner and Niviāna may have felt an implicit demand to perform their ontological connection to the ocean and landscape for the camera as part of a late liberal politics of recognition, they also use it to "stretch the local across... seeping transits" of "capital, toxicity, and discursivity" (ibid: 13). They use performance to amplify a counter geo-ontology—and counter hydro-ontologies of relation.

As Alice Te Punga Somerville puts it in her essay on Oceanic ontologies, 'Where Oceans Come From', the "ocean is not beyond genealogy, but possessed of a genealogy that is impossibly and beautifully wide" (2017: 30). In this essay, she offers a refrain that reinforces the sense of immersive embodied connection and Indigenous knowledge that counters colonial naming of the Pacific. "*We have already been here*: all of us connected to this ocean" (ibid). Her essay, like Jetn̄il-Kijiner's poems, does not play neatly into neo-liberal demands of ethnographic performance. In particular, she uses Oceanic ontologies to explicitly decolonise narratives, and imperialist ways of knowing and claiming oceans and islands. She offers an alternative articulation of knowledge and being as embodied relation to ocean and island. "We are thinking about oceans and how to think with them" (ibid: 28). She cites Jetn̄il-Kijiner's work to reinforce her argument, even as Jetn̄il-Kijiner cites her as a professor and



mentor (Jetn̄il-Kijiner, 2014). Te Punga Sommerville, Jetn̄il-Kijiner and Niviâna together, turning towards each other, are cultivating a conscious citational practice of Indigenous feminist ontology called for by Zoe Todd in ways that potentially fissure hegemonic (geo-ontologic) regimes and grow coalitional feminist Indigenous knowledge and being (Todd, 2014).

These efforts are being supported by “critical ocean studies” (Deloughrey, 2019) that also challenge “human/nonhuman binary of western patriarchal thought and depictions of] violence against non-European, nonnormative others” (26) and materialist hydro-feminisms (Alaimo, 2016; Neimanis, 2017; Chen et al, 2013) that focus on generative embodied practices of acknowledging shared immersiveness to create new imaginaries. Feminist philosopher Astrida Neimanis in her book *Bodies of Water* provides a useful framework for such extended coalitions. “We’ are all in this together (Braidotti, 2002), but ‘we’ are not all the same, nor are we all ‘in this’ in the same way” (2017: 15). As water circulates continuously through all bodies—human, non-human, ocean, lake, river and sky—it generates an entangled archive that is constantly becoming. If we pay attention to this archive through the relationality of our transcorporeal bodies (Alaimo, 2016) sensibilities of responsibility and care, even across large distances, come into focus. “We’ are the condition of each others’ possibilities” (Neimanis, 2017: 19) even as that ‘we’ is provisional and contestable.



Figure 4 – Video still from Kathy Jetn̄il-Kijiner and Aka Niviâna, *Rise: From One Island to Another* (2018) with permission from 350.org, Kathy Jetn̄il-Kijiner and Aka Niviâna and Dan Lin.

During these opening passages, through their hydro-geo ontologies, Jetn̄il-Kijiner and Niviâna establish a direct dialog, developing a strong sense of “you” and “I” between them. But by the end of the initial passage the poem, they begin to shift modes of address. Standing back to back, in solidarity (Figure 4), 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 recognise their shared interests and form a “we” to

enforce what feminist scholar Chandra Mohanty calls Indigenous embodied solidarity, the “commonality of their historical oppression” (Mohanty, 2003: 7).

*mourning landscapes/ that are always forced to change*

Continuing to solely address each other, Jetñil-Kijiner and Niviâna open up to the next part of the poem by speaking about those commonalities as interrelated issues on each of their islands. Jetñil-Kijiner speaks, “Sister of ice and snow/ I come to you now in grief/mourning landscapes/ that are always forced to change.” For a few lines after, the word “force” is repeated to emphasise and shift its meaning. Firstly, it signals a difference between seeing land and ocean as agential forces and seeing the violence of forces that are applied to them. Jetñil-Kijiner mentions “bulldozers” and “blasts” and Niviâna mentions ‘wars’ and “nuclear waste.” Secondly, the poets play with the common use of the term “forcing” in climate science to discuss greenhouse effects—a destabilisation of the hydrological system as carbon is pumped into the atmosphere. The heating in the hydrological sphere melts the ice, heats the oceans, and limits the planet’s ability to stabilise weather. As many scholars have noted in reviewing discussions of how to name the era of carbon-induced climate change, these are not simply “natural” forcings, nor even general “anthropogenic” forcings, but should more accurately be described as colonial, military, and capital forcings caused by ongoing processes of exploitation, extraction, and further commodification of the land and ocean (Haraway, 2015; Demos, 2016 and 2017; Davis and Todd, 2017; DeLoughrey, 2019).

The poet’s quick references point to the systemic “forcings” of colonialism, militarism, and extraction on their respective islands, especially during the Cold War period when the US military used both archipelagos for nuclear projects. Because the purpose of this article is to stay focused on the poetic performance of the artists, I will only briefly sketch out those histories here and note other resources for understanding their complexities more fully.

The most emblematic of these “forcings” is probably the series of atomic and hydrogen bomb tests conducted by the U.S. from 1946 to 1958 in the Marshall Islands, during which time the islands also became a Trust Territory of the U.S. Through active coercion, US officials convinced the communities on Bikini and Enewetak to give up their island homes (though they claimed this was temporary) in order to serve the “good of mankind to end all wars” (Teaiwa, 1996: 89). While testing a series of bombs, under water and in the atmosphere, the military did not take precautions to protect or move the islanders and soldiers from the range of nuclear fallout and even used the event to gather data on the effects of radiation on human populations (Johnston and Barker, 2008; Barker, 2013) and the environment (DeLoughrey, 2013). In effect, the nuclear tests not only rendered the islands a toxic site for centuries and left the global upper atmosphere irradiated (DeLoughrey, 2013: 171), but also incurred long-term, multi-generational trauma of displacement and disease (including cancer and birth defects). Ronit Dome, which holds nuclear waste from the tests and is shown briefly and referenced by Jetñil-Kijiner in *Rise*, now stands as a toxic memorial to this continual contamination and damage. As the sea level rises and the shallow and porous coral becomes inundated around the dome, which is improperly capped at the bottom, radioactive waste continually leaks into the waters around the Marshall Islands. In the context of the poem, the dome is a marker of the residual environmental effects of US militarism and colonialism, which need now to be remembered in the present COFA context. After achieving sovereignty in 1979 with the establishment of the Republic of the Marshall Islands, the islands soon after signed COFA, which provides financial assistance, while also allowing the United States continued use of its army garrison on Kwajalein Atoll as a missile test range

until 2066, with an option to extend until 2086. Kwanjalein atoll, like many in RMI, is now succumbing to sea level rise, which compels US interests in RMI's mitigation and adaptation efforts.

Jetn̄il-Kijiner's specific reference to bulldozers brings these histories into the present stakes of discussions about massive land reclamation and engineering projects underway to protect the islands from inundation.<sup>6</sup> RMI already faces compromised fresh water supplies for drinking and agriculture (Fletcher, 2016). Additionally, there are concerns about the mismanagement of COFA funds (Kupferman, 2011), that have already caused economic vulnerabilities and waves of migration, which in turn impact climate change mitigation and adaptation policies. While there are discussions about the necessity of relocation (Burkett 2011), the realities of being a climate refugee—lack of citizenship, rights, access to social safety nets, and autonomy—are already known by many Marshallese (for more the problematics of climate refugees in Pacific Islands, see Farbotko and Lazrus (2012); see also Burkett, 2014; Yamada, et al, 2017). In *Iep Jāltok*, Jetn̄il-Kijiner herself relates the experience of growing up in Hawai'i as part of a large diasporic Marshall Islanders community, continually dealing with racism against them and general invisibility in this structure (2017).

As the conversations have shifted towards land reclamation as a relatively short-term climate mitigation solution on the islands, especially on Majuro, there are new emphases on building an entirely new island. Jetn̄il-Kijiner notes in a February 2019 blog post, that the line “blasted sands/ and plans to build new atolls /forcing land/ from an ancient, rising sea” was a specific response to visits and conversations with University of Hawaii-based climate scientist Chip Fletcher, who discussed the idea during RMI's Second National Climate Conference in 2018:

*Like Kiribati, it seems ridiculous that Marshall Islands only contributes 0.00001% of global emissions and yet we are now being forced to consider possibilities we would never have considered before, with money we don't have... I should note that there are those of us who view this as an opportunity – an opportunity to pioneer new green technology and restore sustainable cultures through the revitalization of traditional values (assuming the funding comes through)... It's extreme, and desperate. (ibid)*

As she has processed this tangle of perspectives, she has also reiterated that the making of *Rise*, and her work in general, “has never been about drawing ground breaking scientific conclusions, or coordinating international strategies – it's always been about processing the emotional weight of climate change through art” (ibid).

Niviāna comes to a similar conclusion about her position and her contribution in relation to the situation in Greenland. Referencing back to the Marshall Islands as defensive base and laboratory of nuclear testing with her phrasing of “war” and “nuclear waste,” she also connects it to the US's use of Greenland as a strategic defense location during World War II. This story reaches back to Denmark's claims to Greenland since the 1720s. In the context of WWII and during Germany's occupation of Denmark, the US established military bases, radio stations, ports and more to defend the Allies (Fogelson, 1989). After the war, the US made an agreement with Denmark to continue military operations during the Cold War with

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<sup>6</sup> The conference is one of many in which the Marshall Islands is managing its climate mitigation efforts through NDC Partnership (under the Paris Accord), the US (in particular part of FEMA and USAID) and other NGOs, including the Pacific Resilience Project (Leal Filho, 2015).

the development of Thule Airforce Base and also the lesser-known Camp Century, used for a top-secret military operation known as Project Ice Worm to build and launch nuclear missiles using nuclear generators. When the project was abandoned, the nuclear facility, burrowed eight meters below the ice, was sealed with the waste. With the ice melting, new concerns about toxic leaks are now emerging (Henley, 2016).

Imbued in this military history is also a story of colonial resettlement. During the building of Thule Airforce base, the Danish government relocated 116 Greenlanders from Pituffik to Qaanaaq (Marcus, 1995: 66-67; Christensen and Sørensen, 2001), which in 2003 was ruled by Danish courts to be an act of expropriation. Aside from this explicit case of government resettlement, there are also more complex understandings of Greenland's colonial history in terms of what Kristian Nielsen calls Danish "technopolitical" operations (2017). In examining the history of cod fishing in Greenland, Nielsen discusses Denmark's "grand modernization scheme" of the early 20th Century to produce economic growth and social welfare. While there was an attempt to create "hybrid forms of power," (ibid: 72) the cod fishing industry was ultimately a "technopolitics" that encouraged larger towns, centralised health, education, culture, religion, administration and technological infrastructure" (ibid: 77) necessitating the emergence of a modern welfare state mobilised around a single industry. New similar concerns raised in terms oil and mineral exploration (incoming migrants to mine, new population centres, etc.) are now modulated through the lenses of both climate mitigation discourse and Greenland's recent postcolonial framework (Thisted, 2017; Grydehøj, 2016). With Greenland's ice loss averaging 400 billion tons per year, the IPCC's special report on 'Global Warming of 1.5 C' estimates that global sea level will rise somewhere between ten and thirty inches by 2100 if global temperatures warm by 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial times (IPCC, 2018). Though this is concerning to scientists who see the dramatic changes in Greenland as contributing greatly to sea level rise and weather pattern changes around the world, a prominent position in Greenland, from a climate justice perspective, is that it should still be allowed to access its oil reserves. A variation of this position is well articulated by Ulunnguaq Markussen:

*The peoples of the Arctic are not responsible for having produced global environmental threats, yet metropolitan society calls upon us to forego economic development and extractive industries, take symbolic action against global challenges, and stand at the vanguard of a new era of 'conspicuous sustainability' (Grydehøj and Kelman 2016). Such efforts to persuade us to turn our lands and seas into nature preserves, to transform our traditional territories into a form of World Heritage and present the Arctic as a treasure belonging equally to the world as a whole, are ultimately requests that we who have been so long exploited and so thoroughly dispossessed further sacrifice ourselves for the continued wellbeing of those who have proven unwilling to make sacrifices. (2017: 307)*

Markussen, while sharing a concern about the potential "neocolonialism under the guise of sustainable development" (2017: 305) of extractive industries in Greenland, also sees the global environmental movement as yet another iteration of the same. His commentary, as with many climate discussions in Greenland, though addressing autonomy and the power politics of global economic and representational structures, does not address the ontological structures of extractive and capitalist cultures that have objectified the landscapes and

exploited labour.<sup>7</sup> Niviâna has sought to address these issues specifically. In a radio conversation with Eva le Cour, the poet touched on the multilayered issues of linking oil extraction with colonialism. Faced with justifications for continued extraction on one hand, and a transnational eco-cosmopolitanism on another, and now a friend in the Marshall Islands impacted by these decisions on yet another, what kind of ethics, what kind of relations are necessary? Ultimately, she, like Jetn̄il-Kijiner, emphasises relational conversation rather than position taking (2018).

The poem addresses these kinds of relations in the last half of *Rise* as shifting ones, tidal ones, in which the “you” and the “we” need to be re-evaluated at each moment in order, not only to escape the certitude of any one climate mitigation and adaptation proposal and any one gaze, but also to build emotional capacity to see different sides and build strong multiplicitous communities of responsibility and care.

***Not merely an inconvenient truth....***

The perpetual forcings exerted on the landscapes of Greenland and the Marshall Islands have been paired by DeLoughrey (2013) with a militarised gaze—scopic regimes that have seen these environments as isolated yet filled with opportunities for study and exploitation, excusing the collateral damage of bombing, mining and more because these activities are out-of-sight of the world’s larger and wealthier populations. The paradox of militarised views of the Marshall Islands is that while they seem to be remote and invisible to ‘the World,’ they have been thoroughly visible and religiously mapped since the postwar period by the U.S. military (DeLoughrey, 2013 and 2017). Leading up to the H-bomb tests and for decades after, the US made thorough aerial charts of the Marshall Islands in order to measure the extent of the bomb’s capacity. In Greenland too, extensive surveys of ice were made as missile experts attempted to create an underground launch site—ultimately without success (Henley, 2016). In both cases US military records now also act as historical documents for climate change research, providing a longer record of anthropogenic changes than those of any other “remote” areas in the world.

In *Allegories of the Anthropocene* (2019) DeLoughrey argues that islands, looked upon through these aerial views, become ready allegories of anthropogenic catastrophe precisely because they are already figured as such by their continuous surveillance under colonial and scientific scopic regimes. DeLoughrey specifically explores the history of atomic testing in the Marshalls and the related ecological experimentation that turned the island into a “laboratory” related to a history of the colonial Enlightenment project of using islands to understand ecology and develop knowledge of the environment (ibid: 174-5).

Her arguments about the militarised gaze are complemented by what Macarena Gómez-Barris, in her book *The Extractive Zone: Social Ecologies and Decolonial Perspectives*, calls “extractive” views that have organised colonial and capital perspectives of territories organised for resource extraction and capital flow (2017: 4-5). Whether scientific research, mapping, or bulldozing, these practices, rooted in a history of colonial scopic regimes,

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<sup>7</sup> Also worthy of note: Royal Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs fact sheet on Greenland gives general import/export data and also states, “Extensive geological and geophysical investigations of the geographic structures in the area are therefore underway. If such a connection is established, Greenland/Denmark will have the disposal of energy reserves which are thought to be the largest in the world” (Rasmussen, nd: online).

continue to enable governmental policy, venture-capitalist frameworks, and further territorial dominance. While she articulates the socio-political impact of the extractive gaze in South America, it is an important framework in relation to ecological and anthropogenic scopic regimes in general. It helps to understand that it is not just the visual technologies of war, but also the visual technologies of development (such as island building on the Marshall Islands), and resource extraction in Greenland), as continuous with Anthropocene views. Development, and with it now geo-engineering, as necessary interventionist solutions for an era of worst-case scenarios, have become the accepted technical solutions, further entrenching an extractive lifestyle and an economic elite.

The extractive gaze also helps to think about the relationships between techno-scientific views of the Anthropocene, and the eco-cosmopolitan/salvage environmentalism/documentary humanitarianist visual discourses discussed earlier as part of climate crisis views—a scopic regime related to what Eileen Crist (2007) has called climate crisis discourse (see also Ziser and Sze, 2007). This discourse, in relation to islands studies, is summarised by Carol Farbotko and Heather Lazrus:

*Through the channels of international development agencies, research institutions, non-governmental organisations, consultancies and investigative journalism, a climate change crisis discourse has emerged, involving climate change experts, advocates and sceptics making wide-ranging claims over a range of vulnerable people and places (Bravo, 2009). Climate vulnerable populations are being positioned as victims, but also as evidence of the climate crisis. (2012: 2)*

What is at stake here, especially in visual regimes of climate crisis, is a complex accumulation of dominant imagery of the melancholic sublime, the catastrophe, *and* visionary solutions about climate change that all ultimately de-limit perceptions of the *climate* as the crisis—and *not our ethics or our ways of relating* as the crisis. This in turn circumscribes the imaginaries of what can be changed, when, how, and by whom. While these are certainly not overdetermined modes, and indeed they exist, as we have seen, sometimes in contradiction to each other, and again with opportunities for fissuring and modulation from within, we must now assess the weight of all of these views as they constrict embodied experiences and complex realities of interrelation, and imaginaries. Ultimately, the climate crisis imaginary has weight because it continues to circulate not just in documentaries, but also within military discourses (Bigger and Neimark, 2017), predictive science (Hulme, 2011), international policy (Liverman 2009); news and media channels (Ford and King, 2015), and even NGO interactive websites like [climatecentral.org](http://climatecentral.org), in which viewers can inundate their own cities with the push of a mouse (Demos, 2017).

Even when climate crisis views call on the beauty of imagery to propel empathy, they run the risk of keeping viewers passive, as viewers remain glued to the screen but might not take action. In these kinds of views, audiences, are asked to experience the crisis by watching the process from their electronic screens. Further undergirded by neoliberal regimes of information dissemination (24-hour news, Facebook feeds, websites of research think tanks, etc.), they induce even further abstractions, objectification, and passive approaches to the forces on view.

Ultimately this is the “inconvenient truth” of climate change representation (and of *Rise* as launched by [350.org](http://350.org)) that Jetñil-Kijiner and Niviâna attend to within its very frame. In the

second part of the poem, as they reference Al Gore's 2006 film *An Inconvenient Truth* (considered one of first popular climate change films), they both turn to the camera—a counter-vision to this climate crisis gaze. Potentially, the voyeuristic pleasure that the audience might have had in witnessing the intimacy of poets' earlier exchange is ruptured by this direct gaze. Their voices and defiant attitudes acting in unison, they redress 'the World' for the ways in which this attitude and perspective has inculcated a necropolitics in which their lives are sacrificed for the conveniences of modern living—and modern viewing.

*we demand that the world see beyond  
SUV's, ac's, their pre-packaged convenience  
their oil-slicked dreams, beyond the belief  
that tomorrow will never happen, that this  
is merely an inconvenient truth.  
Let me bring my home to yours.  
Let's watch as Miami, New York,  
Shanghai, Amsterdam, London,  
Rio de Janeiro, and Osaka  
try to breathe underwater.  
You think you have decades  
before your homes fall beneath tides?  
We have years.  
We have months  
before you sacrifice us again  
before you watch from your tv and computer screens waiting  
to see if we will still be breathing  
while you do nothing.*



Figure 5 – Figure 4 – Video still from Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner and Aka Niviána, *Rise: From One Island to Another* (2018) with permission from 350.org, Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner and Aka Niviána and Dan Lin.

Speaking truth to consumptive lifestyles as part of the colonial and capital process, they continue, also naming consumers (including image consumers) as “colonising monsters,/ that to this day devour our lives/ for their pleasure.” Calling attention to the disaster views of climate change that the viewers on the other end of the media screen are consuming—*even as the poets speak*—incites a powerful affective response. Viewers are addressed directly and indicted as part of the problem. They are put in the space and position of having to reconcile their understandings of themselves with the poets’ counter view. It is important that this process of address and redress have taken place within the framework of 350.org. The forthright acknowledgement and deconstruction of the complex problematics involved allows for multiple competing affective responses by the millions of viewers who watch the video poem—from sympathy for a person in a landscape, toward acknowledgement that that view is part of the problem and more. These are uncomfortable feelings often denied in neoliberal culture, but ones that must be attended to more.

Not defining exactly who those viewers are, simply using the shifter pronoun “you” leaves that affective space open. Whoever is on the other side of the screen, Jetñil-Kijiner and Niviãna ask their audience to hold themselves accountable. Jetñil-Kijiner and Niviãna take advantage of the intimacy of the video poem’s mode of address by further entangling emotions. After their angry indictment, they then challenge the viewers to engage in empathy—to imagine themselves in the poets’ place, to imagine their cities under water, and to imagine breathing underwater. All of this emotional direct address unsettles the imagery in a way that most documentary films do not. The question is then how viewers are possibly in a frame of mixed emotion in which there may be a basis for “seeing beyond” the screen, for accepting responsibility for perpetuating climate forcings and rising along with Jetñil-Kijiner and Niviãna. The poets allow this emotional space to be as they turn again to each other.

*Each and everyone of us has to decide/ if we/ will/ rise*

The poets end the last stanza by reclaiming their dialogical relation, and then, finally, by turning again to the camera and addressing the audience they just indicted, as “each and everyone of us.” This shifting tide of pronouns could be read as establishing an understanding of embodied becoming, that identity positions and attitudes are not fixed, that a body has the ability to be moved and move. If “we” at the beginning of poem establishes a trans-oceanic space of solidarity beginning with a community of the two poets—a very important space for their mutual recognition, it then builds by the end of the poem toward a potential invitational “we,” open to all viewers.

They end with the phrase “we will rise.” Returning to their initial introductions of hydro-ontological bodies, the poets finally offer a fully immersed perception of themselves and now the viewers as the rising ocean tide—a connective, affective, rhythmic, power of change building over vast distances, they situate their vision as seeing *in/ with/ and part of* the water. What does it mean to be part of the water and rise with the water? It means first of all to practice relating from an immersed perspective, to sit within complex individual and community-based responses to local, national, regional, global, corporate, and scientific climate decision making. It means understanding one’s strategic and performative part in this decision-making *as part of the climate, not simply a solution for it*. For these decisions do indeed shift the waters of the climate.



Jetn̄il-Kijiner, after her recent conversations about RMI's climate mitigation proposals, spoke of her turn toward seeing her spoken-word performances, and in particular her exchanges with Niviāna, as an important ritual practice that can open up to other possible worlds:

*I've found these rituals cleansing for digesting the raw grief that comes with this news. But I can also feel myself craving real solutions, tangible ones I can hold in my hands. And that, unfortunately won't be coming right away. Until then, more processing is necessary, as well as a clear, collective vision of a way forward that makes no concessions. We've already made enough – forced – comprises as it is. (2019: online)*

As an embodied feminist methodology, ritual has recently been highlighted as an important part of a process of developing a public ethics of solidarity—a capacity to deal with the complicated entanglements of climate change and climate perspectives *and still care*. Lisa Kretz (2017) argues in her essay, 'Emotional Solidarity: Mourning Environmental Loss and Empowering Positive Change', that public ritual in many different forms, helps in organising a sense of moral responsibility and that the role of emotion is key in this. In brief, emotions are the experiential, embodied basis of our value system. They move us in one direction or the other. As long as we remain indifferent, confused, or ambivalent and do not go through the process of identifying and orienting complex emotions in context, ethical action is not possible. This requires more spaces and practices in which to immerse oneself and others in emotional complexity. Kretz also describes the varied and charged history of the study of emotion understood variously in psychology, biology, and philosophy through studies of affect, aesthetics, perception, cognition, and more. For so long in Western thought, emotion has been split from "reason"—gendered, classed, and raced. Grief, mourning, and anger have become silenced or "outlawed" in a technoscientific society (see also Ahmed, 2004), even as fear and sympathy have become sophisticated tools in the climate crisis scopic regime. For this reason, materialist feminism, in dealing with ontology and affective forces, is now a useful framework to attend to the importance of emotion in belief systems of crisis and emergency thinking in climate change. The importance of creating hydro-ontological experiences of difficult immersion and relation *as ritual* lies in its potential to confront entangled emotion and to extend that entanglement in all directions.

Immersed in the ocean's time and being, compared to capital's time, the difference between the now of the Marshall Island's inundation and the now of Miami's or Shanghai's inundation is negligible. Development, migration and other "solutions," may be necessary to implement, but also need to be seen as part of a "wave of emergencies" (Calhoun, 2004: 378) extended and intensified by climate crisis imaginaries that ultimately need to be addressed from below the surface of these waves. The poets' figuration of hydro-ontology offers an alternative temporal and spatial multiplicity as a dissident and coalitional politics of solidarity (Sandoval, 2000). This is the essence of their anticolonial feminist perceptual mode, refusing to act as victims and instead calling upon the water itself to shift the affective field so that it can unsettle audiences, and also potentially galvanise them. Of course, there is a limit to what the mode of watching a screen can do for cultivating emotional solidarity. The commitment to relational discussion and action also have to be practiced afterward and beyond. Yet Jetn̄il-Kijiner and Niviāna, in establishing a mode of address for themselves through the performance of this poem as ritual, provide a provisional model.

In the end, I see the tidal power of the poem as reconfiguring the term rise – often used in revolutionary and activist consciousness—for a feminist phenomenology and ontology of the global climate. Specifically, it flips the common imaginary of island communities as

submerged, invisible and inundated by climate change, to an imaginary of immersion and relation. That is, instead of water being the figure of crisis, the enemy in the era of climate change, it is the medium of intermingled bodies in alliance. These feminist alliances of hydro-ontology, I would argue are arising in part because non-linear forms of climate change and its crisis representations are inviting necessarily non-linear ontologies of relating through the climate. Of course, this hydro-ontological immersed perspective exists as a transitional position, often entangled in double consciousness with capitalist crisis views. It is nonetheless an important mode from which to think about potential new climate imaginaries.

As Jetn̄il-Kijiner and Niviāna rise toward each other, I also rise to meet them. Rising from a different place, a different position of privilege and embeddedness in a system that continually entices me to desire what it desires. As a non-Indigenous feminist scholar living in Hawai'i, my commitment to deeply engage with Jetn̄il-Kijiner and Niviāna's work and articulate what I find compelling and important about their negotiations of these representational structures, is held in tension with an acknowledgement of my distance from their islands and positions (Tall Bear, 2014; Todd, 2014; Neimanis, 2015: 149). Yet, acknowledging the situatedness, and therefore the limits of my knowledge, is an essential part of the decolonial process, that can then be open to the possibilities of becoming something different (Mohanty, 2003). With this in mind, my goal has been to highlight the efforts of these artists to not only redress hegemonic scopical and discursive regimes, but also to widen that space of immersive becoming by articulating the poet's relational aesthetics of water and islands as a counter-climate imaginary.

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