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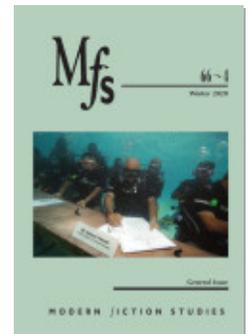
Making Time: Pacific Futures in Kiribati's Migration with
Dignity, Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner's *Iep Jaltok*, and Keri
Hulme's *Stonefish*

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MFS Modern Fiction Studies, Volume 66, Number 4, Winter 2020, pp.
597-619 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.2020.0044>



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**Making Time: Pacific Futures
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*Stonefish***

Rebecca Oh

As global temperatures rise and sea levels with them, mainstream media outlets, climate scientists, and NGOs outside the Pacific have increasingly proclaimed climate refugeeism—the mass displacement of Pacific peoples from their islands due to sea level rise—as the inevitable future of Pacific states.¹ It was precisely to draw attention to and induce action to prevent such a future that president Mohamed Nasheed of the Maldives held his now famous underwater cabinet meeting on 17 October 2009. Clad in scuba gear, Nasheed and most of his cabinet sat under 12 feet of turquoise water to sign a “symbolic cry for help” (Omidi) aimed at the international community. This spectacle not only drew worldwide attention to the disproportionate threat sea level rise poses to small island states, but also, as Rob Nixon has noted, attempted to accelerate the environmental time of distanced international viewers into the imminent threat of inundation which makes up the Maldives’ future.²

MFS Modern Fiction Studies, Volume 66, number 4, Winter 2020.

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Sea level rise narratives define Pacific environmental destiny as one of impending victimization and communal destruction. They draw on linear conceptions of time in which futurity is singular and, as such, the futures they envision are determined by the teleological thrust of cataclysmic progression. However, here I argue that the forces predicted to end Pacific futures have actually generated novel forms of future-making. Despite the pessimism with which Nasheed and others invest the future, the starting point of this essay is Pacific political and aesthetic resistance to submersion narratives and the temporal assumptions that undergird them. I focus on three texts: Kiribati's climate relocation plan *Migration with Dignity*, Marshallese poet Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner's recent collection *Iep Jaltok*, and Maori New Zealander Keri Hulme's short story collection *Stonefish*. In showing how these works mobilize fluid temporalities and critique the limitations of existing political and epistemological orders, I consider how extinction, anthropogenic climate change, and sea level rise, while all obvious threats to existing or future Pacific worlds, are also occasioning new models for imagining Pacific futurity.

We can strategically characterize Kiribati's climate relocation plan as a kind of ground zero for the future-making strategies of Pacific texts in real time. Broadly conceived, *Migration with Dignity* articulates a national policy that seems nonsensical under current requirements for formal statehood, which include criteria like a permanent population and national territory. In the face of sea level rise, it becomes all too clear that these criteria restrict the capacities of island states to protect their national populations. *Migration with Dignity* can thus be seen as an instance of what postcolonial critic Leela Gandhi has called "the ethics of inconsequence" (122), wherein inconsequence is a response to a harmful status quo.

But the seeming nonsense of Kiribati's policy is also a form of political speculation. *Migration with Dignity's* critique of an inadequate present has much in common with certain strategies of utopian and dystopian science fiction, especially the tradition of cognitive stretching or "thinking beyond thought" (4) theorized by Ernst Bloch.³ Under anthropogenic climate change and rising seas in the Pacific, what critics like Tom Moylan and Frederic Jameson have explained as Bloch's theory of "the radical insufficiency of the present" (Moylan 22), usually a mainstay of cultural utopianism, makes existing politics inadequate *prima facie*.⁴ I posit a certain political illegibility as an invitation to think new forms of the state in the first section of this essay, suggesting that a speculative mode is central to the realpolitik calculations of Pacific states facing sea level rise. In the second section,

I consider how *Iep Jaltok* and *Stonefish* take up speculative strategies of temporal plurality, formal innovation, and epistemological defamiliarization to make Pacific futures in other ways.

In *Iep Jaltok*, Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner recuperates the genre of what I call Pacific extinction narratives in order to posit apocalypse or total loss as a form of Pacific worlding. While *Migration with Dignity* critiques the limitations of territory-based states, Jetñil-Kijiner's poetry collection reveals how the long history of predicted extinctions in the Pacific undermine the inevitability of oceanic erasure. It does this partially through the affective intensities, narrative coherence, and thematic relationships of modern poetic sequence; but more importantly, as poetic discourse shifts between the historic and the personal, *Iep Jaltok*'s nonlinear and recursive form produces an understating of Pacific time that historicizes extinction as part of, rather than the end of, Pacific futures.

In the final section, I turn to Keri Hulme's *Stonefish*, which embraces the possibility of a futureless Pacific. But, like Kiribati's impractical policy, it does so to perform an epistemological argument. This short story collection works against climate change denialism, rather than the limitations of existing political orders. I argue that the formal arrangement of Hulme's stories cultivates readers capable of recognizing climate denialism as a cognitive limit brought on by outdated assumptions of stable climate. Moreover, the structure of Hulme's linked stories suggests that such limits must be overcome so that a future apocalypse of impending climate change can be recognized as an already arrived present in the Pacific (and indeed elsewhere).

Migration with Dignity, *Iep Jaltok*, and *Stonefish* are all formally diverse, and to a degree their articulations of the future are produced from their unique generic properties as policy, poetry, and short stories, respectively. However, what is more significant for this essay is that they share formal strategies and objects of critique. The individual formal properties of the texts are less significant than the overlapping approaches to making the future that are visible despite the disparate array of their textual forms. Through shared commitments to pluralizing Pacific time and to disrupting the assumptions of order and cognition that grow out of linear timescapes in which Pacific futures have no place, *Iep Jaltok*, *Stonefish*, and *Migration with Dignity* participate in a common project of reimagining Pacific futurity. Together these texts reconceive the effects of extinction, sea level rise, and climate change to generate futurity out of the very forces that were supposed to end all possible futures.

Inconsequence and Speculation in Kiribati's Migration with Dignity

Kiribati has taken an unusual stance to the threat of sea level rise. In addition to in place adaptations under President Anote Tong's administration (2003–2016), Kiribati also advocated a general policy of relocation: "to create migrants before they become displaced peoples" (Phelps). As articulated on the official website of the Office of the President, "opportunities must be created to enable the migration of those who wish to do so now and in the coming years. This will assist in establishing expatriate communities of I-Kiribati, who will be able to absorb and support greater numbers of migrants in the longer term" ("Relocation"). Under Migration with Dignity, new labor migrants in particular are meant to provide a sort of communal avant-garde. Their modern skills offer the impetus for their relocation, but their continuous ties with those left behind and the epistemic, affective and material resources they will accumulate and transfer to family members, villages, and other community centers are envisioned as enabling the movement of other migrants, including those not easily able to take advantage of restrictive labor categories. It goes without saying that there are many problems with this migratory model, not least of which is that it may reinforce the kind of neoliberal individualism that has threatened and informalized global labor. It also does not challenge models of expendable resources that have underwritten environmental degradation more generally.

However, here I focus on the dissolved administrative and territorial state that is the implied corollary of Kiribati's proposed migratory populace. Along with national territory over which they have exclusive jurisdiction, modern states are classically defined in international law by an effective government, a permanent population over which that government has sole jurisdiction, and the capacity to enter into relations with other states.⁵ Warrants or assumptions of noninterference make possible the modern Westphalian idea of territories and populations over which states have sovereign control. It is, however, this dual foundation of bounded territorial exclusivity and mutual noninterference between states that is brought into question by the possibilities of lost territory and mobile populations that sea level rise brings to the fore.⁶

By implying its own dissolution under the current Westphalian order, Migration with Dignity interrupts status quo statehood with an impossible, illegible version. Indeed, the very genre of national policy itself becomes moot, since the actionability and practicability that defines such a genre is foreclosed by the same international

norms that render Migration with Dignity's content nonsensical. But if such a plan seems like mere fabulation from the perspective of standard international statehood, Migration with Dignity can also be seen as a stringent condemnation of the very political conditions that occasion its illegibility. The gap between the content and genre of its national policy in the context of Westphalian requirements for modern statehood make Migration with Dignity impractical, but this same misalignment highlights the impossibility of Pacific state action within existing international strictures. As such, Migration with Dignity's critique of present state limitations rests precisely in its incompatibility with existing regimes of sense-making and political action.

Here I follow Gandhi's idea of the ethics of inconsequence. Inconsequence, she argues, can serve as a critique of existing circumstances because it "appears as strictly ungenerative and as a type of symbolic celibacy" (127). As such, it amounts to a "refusal to participate in any perpetuation of the status quo." Inconsequence in this mode appears as such precisely because it fails to conform to normative criteria of causality, consequence, or logic. While failure to conform makes any such action appear inconsequential, departure from a given realm of consequence is also a way of calling the given into question as violent or unjust: withdrawal from such a status quo is the lesser crime.

Kiribati's dispersed population and dissolved state take on a new meaning within this rubric. Rather than an illegible form of political organization, the impracticality of a dissolved state dramatizes the erosion of the state's protective capacities, which are fundamental to the *raison d'être* of modern states. This erosion follows from international requirements for statehood in an era of sea level rise. While Westphalian limitations continue to monopolize the parameters of legible and effective state action, they do not provide alternatives that will reproduce such action when those parameters are threatened. Impracticality, then, maps the oppression of this system and the withdrawal of Pacific commitments from the current international order.

The bad governmentality of extraterritorial national protection is of course not to be overlooked. It can be seen in the recourse to national security in the international war on terror perpetuated by the US, or the intensified policing of refugees across the European Union, as well as in border areas outside the member states of the Union proper. In the Pacific context however, such aspirations to supranational protection work more to highlight the inequities of an international system that consigns the populations of small states to a

position of sacrifice for the greater good of large carbon producers or the function of canaries in the coalmine for a global climatic future that can only count the Pacific as already lost.⁷

Impracticality is, in short, one way to critique what has become an unjust and untenable political status quo. Migration with Dignity also makes this critique through its temporal dimensions, which bear surprising parallels to those in science fiction. Ursula Heise notes that recent science fiction often represents a “near-future” (4) to “highlight some kind of loss.” This contrasts with the classical Jamesonian understanding that science fiction represents distant futures primarily to historicize the present.⁸ Instead, these dystopian near-futures extrapolate from “current configurations” (5) to invite considerations of “the present as the matrix of the past from which dystopia sprang.” From this critical perspective, Kiribati’s dissolved state can be considered a dystopian future that reflects back upon a present matrix of anthropogenic sea level rise, Westphalian statehood, and the limits they place on Pacific state capacities. Or, in reverse, the dystopian dissolved state is projected forward from this matrix of present political inadequacy.

Migration with Dignity can also, simultaneously, provide a utopic narrative that is unthinkable within the present system. Since at least Bloch, utopian thinking has been an ontological urge to “[venture] beyond” (4), an “expectation, hope, intention towards possibility that has still not become” (7). Thus, whether a dissolved state like the one Kiribati proposes would ever come into practice is much less significant than the Blochian process of thinking beyond present state forms that the dissolved state invites. As pertinent is Moylan’s conception of science fiction, for Moylan suggests that utopian science fiction is the genre of Blochian speculation par excellence, but that its utopianism is “rooted in the unfulfilled needs and wants of specific classes, groups, and individuals *in their unique historical contexts*” (1; emphasis added). Insofar as the dissolved state pursues a political beyond in response to specific insufficiencies in the present, it shares critical methods with both Blochian utopia and the kinds of contextual defamiliarization that Moylan and Heise have associated with science fiction.

Kiribati’s planned future is certainly not literary fiction, but it offers a representation of the future that comments critically upon the present and attempts to move beyond currently thinkable horizons. That real politics and science fiction now share a boundary of critique is symptomatic of just how inadequate present forms of political redress, both national and international, have become under

sea level rise.⁹ The “radical insufficiency of the present” (Moylan 22) is then not only an ontological pull or the mark of a literary genre, but also the operative condition of Pacific politics itself in the era now conceptualized as the Anthropocene.

Surviving the Future: Pacific Extinction Narratives and Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner’s *Iep Jaltok*

Pacific texts do not only destabilize inadequate presents. They also transfigure the past by participating in widespread strategies of contesting linear and teleological Western time, whether through indigenous ontologies of cyclical temporality or postcolonial inhabitations of heterogonous time.¹⁰ To this end Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner’s poetry collection *Iep Jaltok* mobilizes a layered and accreted temporality, wherein past Pacific injustices, injuries, and indeed formerly impossible futures have not only come to pass but also recur in the present. By posing Pacific presents as futures that were formally impossible Jetñil-Kijiner’s poetry enacts Pacific temporality as a layering of oral and somatic memory in which both present injustices and a *longue durée* of pasts-cum-impossible futures still adhere.

In doing so, *Iep Jaltok* does not defer an apocalyptic future. Instead it asserts the possibility, indeed the past guarantee, of Pacific worlds in spite of Western temporal closures. In *Iep Jaltok*, Jetñil-Kijiner represents Pacific history as a sedimented accumulation that, like Achille Mbembe’s notion of time in the postcolony, “is not a series but an *interlocking* of presents, pasts, and futures that retain their depths of other presents, pasts, and futures, each age bearing, altering, and maintaining the previous ones” (16).¹¹ Such a notion of fluid, recursive, and nonsynchronous time casts the past as always carried forward into and composing with the present.

Such temporal refiguring recuperates past predictions of regional extinction, or what I call the genre of Pacific extinction narratives. Insofar as the extinction narrative works by posing the non-sovereignty and nonfuturity of the Pacific, it has recurred historically in different forms, and I argue that climate refugeeism can be seen as only the latest version of the genre. By enacting a nonteleological conception of time that poses climate refugeeism as the very kind of future that has already been faced and endured in the Pacific, Jetñil-Kijiner situates sea level rise within a longer lineage of impossible futures so that, in *Iep Jaltok*, extinction becomes part of Pacific history rather than its end. Jetñil-Kijiner’s poetry therefore speaks from the place of an impossible subject, a subject of history whom history was

anticipated to wipe out. This Pacific subject does not signify nothing, however, and instead articulates an irrevocable something—or more specifically, a sometime—that rewrites the teleological thrust of submersion and refugeeism, and even the singularity of futurity itself as construed in notions of sequential time.¹²

In the context of US settler colonialism, Jessica Hurley has noted “the ongoing power of a white-defined realism to distinguish possible from impossible actions” (778). Discussing the state of exception within which indigenous tribes exist in the American juridical and political landscape, Mark Rifkin has argued similarly that the US exercises “an exclusive uncontestable right to define what will count as a viable legal or political form(ul)ation” (91). In other words, certain aspects of indigenous life under settler colonialism fall under the purview of what colonizing powers define as the (im)possible. In the Pacific, Euro-American travelers and settler colonists alike have deemed the entirety of indigenous life impossible for centuries. Pacific scholars have tracked many versions of this impossibility. Some of these discourses invoke the actual physical destruction of islands and the biological death of islanders. Even when they do not, they share in common assumptions of, and thus work to construct the Pacific as, a place and a peoples with no future.

The theory of “fatal impact” (Keown 40) was an early version of the Pacific extinction narrative, based in the actual decimation of islander populations due to the introduction of European diseases in the nineteenth century.¹³ Michelle Keown has described the prevalence of “fatal impact” narratives in *fin de siècle* writing about the Pacific where, as islanders died of foreign contagions against which they had no immunity, a “belief that Pacific cultures were dying out as a result of contact with Europeans gained widespread currency . . . reinforced by the application of Darwin’s theory of natural selection to Indigenous societies.” Writers like Robert Louis Stevenson and Jack London perpetuated such theories and incorporated them into their fiction.¹⁴ And while Pacific populations recovered in the twentieth century, this narrative retained currency in spite of census data to the contrary.

Later discourses of Pacific futurelessness focused on the aftermath of Pacific independence movements and targeted Pacific political and economic viability.¹⁵ In this view, the physical smallness and remoteness of Pacific islands from centers of metropolitan capital meant that they were also isolated from the prosperity brought by the global market. Greg Fry, writing of Australian representations of the Pacific in the 1990s, notes that the Pacific was regarded as facing

“an approaching ‘doomsday’ or ‘nightmare’ unless Pacific Islanders remake themselves” (25). From the center-periphery model perpetuated by global capital, only a Malthusian “future nightmare of overcrowding, poverty, mass unemployment, serious environmental degradation, and decline in health standards” for Pacific islands seemed possible (26). Unsurprisingly, incorporating Pacific islands into international networks of trade was touted as the appropriate remedy.¹⁶

Finally, European and American nuclear militarism during the Cold War and after required the Pacific “Basin” (*Routes* 102) to be represented as an empty space.¹⁷ As numerous scholars have pointed out, the Pacific was chosen for nuclear testing in part because small island populations could be relocated with relative ease and were regarded as “exotic, malleable and, most of all, dispensable” (Teiwa 20). Bikini Island, where the first of 67 US nuclear tests took place from 1946 to 1958, was chosen largely because of its remoteness from commuter or commercial air and sea routes; nuclear, economic, and demographic priorities thus rendered islanders’ lives “ungrievable” (Butler xiv) and the atolls into a space of inconsequential violence. The latter sentiment was perhaps most famously demonstrated in Henry Kissinger’s dismissal of the Pacific: “There are only 90,000 people out there. Who gives a damn?” (qtd. in Teiwa 25). Nuclear history epitomizes, though it does not have monopoly over, narratives in which the future of non-Pacific places is produced from the excision of the Pacific from a shared future.

Such narratives were supposed to proclaim and herald the end of Pacific futures. Instead, they constitute a lineage or genealogy of surviving the future, by recording past and ongoing violence between Pacific peoples and Western neocolonialism and militarism. *Iep Jaltok* shares in this project by embedding extinction narratives within the historical time of Pacific modernity. Throughout the collection Jetñil-Kijiner weaves extinction narratives, especially nuclear militarism, into a revisionist account of the Marshall Islands where the very bodies now threatened by sea level rise become the traveling repositories of a history that is not even past, much less prematurely ended. Beginning with Marshallese founding myths that include the invention of the sail and the birth of Marshallese seafaring, the collection then moves on to chart postwar Marshallese experience. Linking the historic with the autobiographical, the collection’s second section, “History Project,” chronicles the islands’ material deprivation after World War II and the onset of international aid, before unraveling the history of regional nuclear testing. The section’s eponymous poem

“History Project” opens as an exercise in self-education and political consciousness raising as the speaker, an unnamed Marshallese girl loosely based on Jetñil-Kijiner herself, declares: “time to learn my own history” (20).

The poem highlights the horrific physical consequences of nuclear fallout on Marshallese bodies: “I glance at a photograph / of a boy, peeled skin”; “I read firsthand accounts / of what we call / jelly babies” (20). The poem is more than an act of historical witnessing and exposure though, as it is bookended by two poems about nuclear fallout that extend its temporal, formal, and spatial edges. The ancillary extensions of “History Project,” “The Letter B is For,” and “Fishbone Hair” bring the physical consequences of fallout into the somatic immediacy of ongoing radiation and formally beyond a single poem’s containment.

Given the extensive half-lives of nuclear isotopes and thus the multigenerational effects of radiation poisoning, it is not surprising that Jetñil-Kijiner represents the consequences of the bomb outside the boundedness of a single poem. Attention to the secondary effects of radiation after the initial spectacle of a bomb’s explosion is not unusual, but within the context of Pacific extinction narratives, nuclear radiation’s aftermath works as a perverse confirmation of the failure of extinction, evidenced in the slow death of bodies generations removed from the initial tests and spatially remote from the islands. Somatic decay, repeated from “jelly babies” to the speaker’s niece Bianca, is then proof of uncontained and ongoing history, rather than its ending.

Hence, the visually fluid form of “The Letter B is For” appropriately plays with its own borders and boundaries. More pointedly, the poem is formally ironic; though presented as a dictionary entry, it only records its own inability to contain the meanings of the very word it sets out to define:

Kobaam̄ kē?

Are you contaminated

with radioactive fallout? (19)

As the poem’s staggered typography mimics the ways in which the consequences of the bomb slide (or fall) away from the moment of initial contact, the bomb becomes redefined as somatic residue rather than temporal finale. It diffuses threat to at an anonymous “you” that could be any body and thus grafts an unruly excess onto both the semantic and temporal containment of the bomb’s fatal relation to Pacific bodies.

The concluding poem in this sequence, “Fishbone Hair,” parallels the diffused possibility of fallout with the particularity of its effects on an individual, the speaker’s niece. “There had been a war / raging inside Bianca’s six year old bones” (25), and her fallen hair becomes the emblem of radioactive fallout in the present. But this poem also gestures to the collection’s later concerns with climate change, yoking the former impossible future of nuclear radiation with the current impossible future of sea level rise. In “Fishbone Hair,” the somatic effects of nuclear testing and Pacific expendability manifest as “*rootless hair / that hair without a home*” (24; emphasis added). Loss moves from the somatic to the social in the later poem “Dear Matafele Peinam,” where islanders are once again framed as expendable. In the latter poem, however, they are the victims not of Western nuclear colonialism but of an unchecked and largely external carbon economy:

Men say that one day
that lagoon will devour you . . .
They say you, your daughter
and your granddaughter too,
will wander
rootless
with only
a passport
to call home. (70; emphasis added)

Here, rootlessness is not a symptom of nuclear militarism in the Pacific, but a product of sea level rise brought on by industrialized fossil fuel accumulation and human-induced climate change. Linked references like these across Jetñil-Kijiner’s poetic sequences work to concatenate past and present injustices, expand the temporal, spatial, and affective horizons of Pacific injury, and underscore islander continuity in the face of calamitous accretions.

In their influential *The Modern Poetic Sequence*, M. L. Rosenthal and Sally Gall have suggested that such affective effects and dynamics are the primary mark of modern poetic sequence. While they also suggest such “feeling involving a number of radiant centers” (11) may be “progressively liberated from a narrative or thematic framework,” *Iep Jaltok* does not prioritize affect at the expense of narrative cohesion. Indeed, its task of revealing and recuperating deleterious Pacific histories depends on reproducing the legibility and narrativity of ongoing harm. That is, in *Iep Jaltok* affect adheres precisely in the poems’ narrativity, their chronicling of individual characters and the

particular spaces and experiences of the Pacific as a wasting ground of Western violence. Joseph Conte suggests that such narrative and thematic cohesion does in fact characterize modern poetic sequence, in contrast to the largely unrelated disjunctures of postmodern poetic series. The point is, though, that *Iep Jaltok* mobilizes a formal hallmark like poetic affect precisely in its sociohistoric task of reconceptualizing Pacific time; affect accumulates from and through the residuum of former Pacific extinctions, and so produces a sense of Marshallese places and peoples as having always already endured the impossible.

In this way, Pacific extinction narratives can be considered not only as (neo)colonial ideology, but as perverse precedent. In these poems, rather than the linearity of extinction, past harms and present endurance formally produce each other through contrary overlaps that upset the certainty of a catastrophic future.¹⁸ In being made historical, as well as in offering a lineage of futures that were never supposed to come to pass, Pacific extinction narratives conversely testify to something like the real resilience of islanders in the face of a largely deleterious history of Euro-American encounters. More radically, they suggest the impossibility of an impossible future. Apocalypse as precedent overturns the very world-ending convention of the genre. By turning extinction into antecedent, the ending of the future becomes itself a kind of Pacific worlding, and *Iep Jaltok* aspires toward an unknown future not tied to an apocalyptic ending.

However, it must be said that as much as the collection positions climate change as a survivable future, its chronicle of Pacific continuity is clouded by anticipations of loss. In the previous quote from “Dear Matafele Peinam,” rootlessness signifies interruption as much as continuity, as citizenship is unmoored from its territorial ground and the lagoon of home is replaced by the pathos of a passport from nowhere. Similarly, while Migration with Dignity attempts to reframe this kind of loss as an opportunity, its challenge to ordinary statehood is only latent and produced from contrapuntal reading. The dissolved state of section one is the implicit shadow of Kiribati’s explicit migratory plan; Kiribati has not directly proposed a non-Westphalian state form to disrupt the international conservatism that is already attempting to excise it. Nor is Migration with Dignity generalizable to other islands. Tuvalu, for instance, has reinforced its commitments to remaining in place in its most recent national policies, and comparable investments in existing territorial statehood informed Nasheed’s underwater cabinet meeting.

Keri Hulme’s dizzying mixed-genre short story collection *Stonefish*, in contrast, explicitly takes on the epistemological challenge that

Iep Jaltok and most Pacific states, even Kiribati, are at pains to avoid: that sea level rise might indeed lead to Pacific futurelessness. *Stonefish* raises the problem of a futureless world, however, as a cognitive conjuring trick. For if old worlds of climate stability have ended, new ones shaped by anthropogenic climate change and resource consumption have already arrived. The collection suggests that it is only former worlds of stable climate that have become futureless or untenable; epistemological commitments to these foregone worlds thus foreclose one's awareness of the new real world of changed climate, and *Stonefish* suggests that such failures of consciousness and subsequently of action will indeed lead to dead ends. However, *Stonefish* works to show how these old epistemologies can be replaced with new kinds of awareness commensurate with the new climatic reality, and thus suggests a new ethos for living within the Anthropocene present. Such cognitive revisions position the Pacific not as purged from a common future but as the vanguard of a more general awareness to come.

In this vein, *Stonefish* opens in a futuristic world shaped by floods and ends in a world not noticeably different from that inhabited by twenty-first-century readers. Its first story, "Floating Words," is a meditation on proper perceptions of and action in response to drastic environmental change. It provides an example of how to live well with such change by relinquishing the prevailing ethos of "man on top" (32) that supports human consumption and domination vis-à-vis other humans, nonhuman species, and resources.¹⁹ The exhausted world and pervasive but unexplained violence of its last story, "Midden Mine," can by contrast be seen as *Stonefish's* warning about the consequences of climate inaction.

I read *Stonefish's* opening and closing stories within Forrest Ingram's influential definition of the short story cycle: "a book of short stories so linked to each other by their author that the reader's successive experience on various levels of the pattern of the whole significantly modifies his experience of each of its component parts" (19). I argue that these two stories must be read as linked referents within the collection as a whole, as the critique of the latter story is only apprehensible by reading it against the first. In particular, "Midden Mine" comes to appear as a failed doubling of the successful climate adaptation staged in "Floating Words," and so only together do they clarify the need for climate action in the present. More importantly, by coming at the end of the collection, "Midden Mine" produces retrospectively an epistemological gap between the collection's readers and the story's own narrator. In doing so, *Stonefish* positions readers outside a denialist present to beg the question that is the disavowed horizon of Pacific politics: how to live after the flood.

Stonefish: Our/Other Futures

Keri Hulme is perhaps best known for her 1985 Booker prize-winning *The Bone People*, a novel that put New Zealand literature on the global literary map and cemented Hulme's place as one of New Zealand's most important contemporary writers. *Stonefish*, an eclectic collection of poetry and short stories released some two decades later, has by contrast garnered remarkably little critical attention. Elizabeth DeLoughrey has produced one of the few scholarly engagements with the collection. In "Ordinary Futures," she argues persuasively that "Hulme depicts creeping sea level rise in terms that emphasize mutation and adaptation rather than the spectacular tone of apocalypse" (357), and thus posits "the sea, climate change, mutation, and the submarine as profoundly ordinary."

For DeLoughrey, the collection's "ethics of environmental adaptability" (353) is most apparent in "Floating Words," which in part plumbs the task of the writer in the face of climatic change. Drawing on this first story's formal movements between narrative present and past, DeLoughrey reads the story's narrative flux as symptom and hermeneutic for living with climate change. An ethos of mutation and flexibility is made explicit in the text as well: "We knew—the television told us, the radio mentioned it often—that the oceans would rise, the greenhouse effect would change the weather, and there could be rumblings and distortion along the crustal plates as Gaia adjusted to a different pressure of water. *And we understood it to be one more ordinary change in the everlasting cycle of life*" (Hulme 18; emphasis added).

Such conceptions of cyclical rather than cataclysmic change echo Maori conceptions of time, "that position the past in front while the future is behind" ("Ordinary" 359). Such temporal understandings do not work to diffuse the threat of world-ending as *Iep Jaltok* does, because change is not perceived as a threat of future loss. Instead, environmental change, however drastic, can be incorporated within indigenous ontologies of continuous transformation and relation with the nonhuman world.²⁰ Invocations of immense geological scale (Gaia) within a conception of the ordinary approach what Elizabeth Povinelli has called "geontology" (5), which DeLoughrey explains as "a mutually constitutive biography/geology" that "[incorporates] the subject into planetary networks of kinship" ("Ordinary" 354). *Stonefish's* invocations of adaptation, mutation, and planetary intimacy thus offer ontological and ethical models for living large within climatic change rather than seeking to minimize or resist its threat.

DeLoughrey's reading of the indigenous ethos of "Floating Words" offers a powerful counter to the dominant geopolitical commitments of a world defined by Western standards of linear time, territorial states, and climate disaster. *Stonefish* also, however, critiques these limitations through the formal relationships between its stories. Proposing an alternative ethos is one challenge; modeling how or why one might give up hegemonic forms of worlding grounded in destructive, Western-style resource wastage is a different and equally difficult project. It is a project that *Stonefish* takes up by producing the decaying present of its last story, "Midden Mine," as a mirror of a readerly present and as the failed double of the mutable future in "Floating Words." Together, these linked stories offer a timely critique of the vicissitudes of our present as readers in and of the Anthropocene.

"Floating Words" begins with its speaker balanced between land and water, and between past and present: "*Thinking Back* (I am balanced on the end bollard, the slip-rope in my hand) there were omens all along" (5; emphasis added). In the story's concluding paragraphs we find this state of suspension is spatial as well as temporal, for the speaker has been about to "drift away" (18) from her home on a makeshift raft bound for open water. But between these moments of imminent departure the speaker thinks back to an earlier moment of asking: "Change, change, change. Where is solidity? Where is the rock?" (6). In this earlier moment, she had not yet learned to embrace the new normal of an altered climatic world.

The unnamed narrator eventually accepts that "nothing is static, settled, or permanent any more" (16), a conclusion about her world's mutating nature that is also a commentary on the place and role of writers: "Storytellers never stay in one place for long" (17). I suggest, though, that the narrator-writer is not only an imminent wanderer. She has indeed read "the tide in microcosm" and "[recognizes] a sign when [she] is given one so clearly" before deciding to leave home; but if she advocates an embrace of fluidity it becomes clear that she is also a guide for those who, like her former self, cling to the "rock" (6) of what counted as sober action in an old world of stable climate.

The narrator therefore leaves her repository of books—or signs—as a "FREE LIBRARY" (15) available to "any reader" (17). Too, though we are never told exactly what she writes, she disperses mis- sive into the ether, participating in an economy of words. She sends chapters from "*The Neverending Novel*" (17) off in a weekly mail blimp: "well-established and dependable. I never did find out who started it, how credit was established, but it worked" (8). In exchange for words

she requests and receives foodstuffs; if such an exchange of individual interiority for material provision seems to be an allegory of modern governmentality, this traveling blimp also makes her weekly missives available to the itinerant, floating bubble cities and mobile populations that have come to populate “Floating Words”’s future world.

The narrator also dubs the barge she leaves on the “Pirate Epistle” (19), a name which suggests an ethos of flouting regulation, denouncing country and boundary, and pursuing a radical freedom; but it is also a name which invokes the formal relationality of epistolary exchange. The missives she leaves span an openness toward environmental change but they are equally premised upon correctly interpreting signs of change, realizing that such signs may require novel forms of action, and subsequently facilitating those reactions for others. The story imagines, in other words, not only what a value system for living with a radically changed climate might include, but also a model for disseminating such values.

More significantly, *Stonefish* is concerned with addressing the costs of failing to adapt, that is, the risks of not giving up the old system that preceded and produced the altered climate of its futuristic opening. These concerns are funneled through the relationship between “Floating Words” and the collection’s last story, “Midden Mine.” “Midden Mine” unfolds around an archaeological dig by a team of international academics, Dave, Bea, and Cam, who search for remnants of past civilizations and attempt to ascribe to them meaning and measurability. The archaeological plot belies a concern for a changing climate, which is revealed piecemeal, through the story’s formal and thematic staging of its characters’ failure to read signs of environmental change that are as profound as the more fantastical ones in “Floating Words.”

Following the story’s episodic narrative structure, all three protagonists are plagued by personal losses and deadly illness that are never fully explained or embedded comprehensively in the plot. If this seems to resurrect extinction narratives of dying races that have overdetermined the Pacific, Hulme turns such exhaustion to other purposes here, where fragmentation is both theme and heuristic. The dig reveals a layer of charcoal that testifies to past human disruptions—“Where did they get all the wood?” (192)—and amidst these remnants of trees are human remains. It is unclear if the charcoal is from deforestation or from the practice of sacrificing human bodies. But in twinning past human interspecies violence and environmental destruction, “Midden Mine” sketches for readers a scene ripe for interpretation. We are primed to expect this when

we are told early in the story that the narrator Dave “gets feelings about sites” (193). But instead of fulfilling the injunction to read the signs of environmental violence, “Midden Mine”’s narrator comes up against an epistemological limit. He fails to understand the dynamic of human domination that justifies violence toward other humans and nonhuman species alike, as well as the continuity of these patterns in his present.

This staging of failed knowledge is symptomatic of the kinds of cognitive limits that, over the course of the story, produce climate denialism as ironic critique. For example, even though we are given ample signs of environmental change, the narrator of “Midden Mine” can only interpret them as the stuff of nightmares rather than as evidence of a new reality to which he must respond: he is “awake, wet with fear-sweat, wondering why the waves were phosphorescent green—” (215). Glowing waves in the time of the first story would fit into that narrator’s understanding of an altered climate, for “Midden Mine”’s phosphorescent waves are repeated in “Floating Words”’s own strange find, a multi-colored mushroom “glowing with minute blue sine waves” (17). More mundane signs of change abound in “Midden Mine” as well: “it is gusty and chill, *most unusual* for December. Well, for the Decembers I remember from the decades past” (189); “Overcast, and the *disquieting* feeling that the skies are going to burst” (216); “We’ve had huge storm surges where a simple southerly *would have been ordinary*, would have been enough” (217; emphases added). Here, epistemological commitments to a vanished world work to deflect the sense of disquiet the narrator admits but then refuses, diminishing also the possibility of a changed environmental consciousness.

Such linked references in turn produce dissonances or epistemological gaps between “Midden Mine”’s narrator and the collection’s readers. For the reader of the collection’s last story, “Midden Mine” is also the reader of *Stonefish* as a whole, and the environmental knowledge gained from reading the preceding stories positions readers outside the present whose limit “Midden Mine” traces. From the perspective of enlightened readers then, the old world to which the narrator still clings appears as false consciousness. In other words, while “Midden Mine”’s narrator is the avatar of a conservative status quo, one characterized by climate denialism and inaction, “Midden Mine”’s readers are of a different epistemological and indeed temporal cast. In representing a dying present that subsequently places its readers in a future form of awareness, “Midden Mine” is a provocation beyond the limited epistemologies, cognitive failures, and old-world commitments that it stages.

As these texts make clear, submersion and refugeism are only one approach to the future. Staying or leaving is one way of thinking about the effects of sea level rise. Alternate habitations, poised between prediction and speculation, are located in the very processes of thinking the future in its variegated forms and multiplicity of temporal spans. In this essay I have considered how three diverse texts mobilize formal innovations to shuttle across the aesthetic and political registers in which Pacific futurity is being imagined. Migration with Dignity courts inconsequence to think beyond the limits of existing political forms; *Iep Jaltok*'s poetic sequences produce narrative and affective concatenations that belie the teleology of extinction; and *Stonefish* stages the cognitive revelations that await enlightened readers in an uncanny Anthropocene present. These are processes of reconceiving the future, depicting strategies of living under the impossible time of oceanic erasure. But more than merely offering symbolic resolution, these texts unmoor futurity from its too obvious determinants in order to make visible the incommensurate and unpredictable modes of temporality and speculation through which the future is always being made.

Notes

1. See Dreher and Voyer for a thorough overview of the rise and prevalence of the climate refugee frame. See McNamara and Gibson for a discussion of how terms like climate refugeism are treated by the United Nations and other international bodies compared to the discourses of state ambassadors from Pacific Island nations. See Farbotko and Lazrus for discussions of migration as an everyday practice in the Pacific rather than only a sign of climate displacement.
2. See Nixon's "Epilogue," which elaborates the material and perceptual challenges of sea level rise. Submersion in the Maldives is both overlooked on the world stage and a harbinger of the effects sea level rise will have across the globe.
3. The entirety of Bloch's *The Principle of Hope* examines the ontological urge to move beyond the present toward newness, but see especially the Introduction and the chapter entitled, "Discovery of the Not-Yet-Conscious or of Forward Dawning."
4. Moylan situates Bloch's theorization of utopia within the tradition of science fiction and European counterculture. Jameson meanwhile discusses the place of utopianism and the impulse toward newness in Bloch's thought overall as it relates to Marxism of the Frankfurt school.

5. See Article I of the 1933 Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of States. These rules are also not always followed; military and humanitarian interventions contravene principles of non-intervention and some state-like entities, like the Order of Malta, operate without territory.
6. For these reasons, legal scholars like Burkett and McAdam have argued that climate change poses a challenge to the very foundations of international law.
7. The injustice of historic carbon emissions, which threaten most those who have produced the least, is emphasized by the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), to which Kiribati belongs. Such moral claims are also nominally acknowledged by principles of common but differentiated responsibility established in the Kyoto Protocol.
8. Jameson's theory that science fictions set in the distant future primarily historicize the present is one of the most influential interpretations of the genre's aesthetic function. See "Progress versus Utopia, or, Can We Imagine the Future?" in *Archaeologies of the Future*.
9. That I have turned to cultural and literary theories to analyze a political text here is only problematic if the political and the literary are seen as separate spheres. But practitioners of new historicism have for decades now "[broken] the base/superstructure, text/context dichotomy" (Wilson 11). A similar attentiveness to literature's entwinement with its social and political world—and vice versa—is foundational to Marxist cultural analysis, especially the cultural materialism pioneered by Raymond Williams, and to the symptomatic reading Said introduced to postcolonial discourse studies. This is all to suggest that the kind of theoretical crossing I utilize here between literature and politics is far from unprecedented. Moreover, utopia itself has never been exclusively an ontological project or a literary genre. Gordin, Tilley, and Prakash point to the long history of utopias as actual political and social movements, arguing that they "reveal . . . a set of abiding concerns and cultural formations that *generated* both the desire for utopian transcendence and the specific form that utopia/dystopia took" (4).
10. See the Introduction and chapter 2 of Charkabarty's *Provincializing Europe* for postcolonial heterotemporality and DeLoughrey's "Ordinary Futures" for indigenous, specifically Maori, conceptions of cyclical time.
11. Mbembe's notion of overlapping time in which the past is carried forward in, informs, and changes within the present is also found in Gramsci's *The Prison Notebooks*, a text important both to the concept of plural time and the subaltern in postcolonial studies.
12. My phrasing nods to Mbembe's argument that Africa has signified "*being nothing* (nothingness)" (4) within Western philosophy. Indigenous

scholars like Byrd have similarly argued that indigenous populations are consigned to an ontological status of negativity or absence by European and US colonialism, a pattern visible in the Pacific. See Byrd, chapter 1.

13. The devastation European diseases wrought on indigenous populations without immunity to them was part of colonial encounters the world over, and not confined to the Pacific. For a longer history of fatal impact's Pacific genealogy see Edmond.
14. See Keown, chapter 2. These writers also at times critiqued various aspects of European exploitation of indigenous populations, but this does not diminish their contribution to fatal impact narratives.
15. Lazrus has interpreted the Tuvaluan pursuit of independence with only a British second-hand cargo ship as testament to British skepticism over the likelihood of Tuvalu's separation from the Gilbert Islands (Kiribati), and conversely as Tuvalu's ethos of "perseverance in the face of opposition" (225). See also MacDonald and McIntyre for an account of independence in the wider region.
16. It was around this time and against this same narrative that Hau'ofa revolutionized Pacific studies in "Our Sea of Islands." In this essay, Hau'ofa insisted the Pacific be seen not as "islands in a far sea" (31) but as "a sea of islands," that is, as a richly interconnected space of cultural and economic exchange already participating in global modernity rather than separate from it.
17. France conducted nuclear tests in French Polynesia until 1996. The empty "Basin" (*Routes* 102) stands in contrast to the active Asian "Rim" states. See DeLoughrey, *Routes and Roots*, chapter 2.
18. Bernstein warns against the dangers of historical determinism or foreshadowing, as well as "backshadowing" (9) its corollary wherein the past is reconstructed from present circumstances, eliding the contingency of both present and past.
19. Hulme's gender dynamics should also be noted here; those characters most amenable to adaptability and nondominance in her stories are women or recognizable female, while men, especially in "The Pluperfect Pā-Wā," embody practices of human species isolation and destruction.
20. DeLoughrey situates her argument about indigenous cyclical time in contrast to Chakrabarty's famous challenge to the representability of human species-being in the Anthropocene in "The Climate of History." She is also informed by the turn to porous and more than human bodies prevalent in new materialism.

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