

The sea is rising:

Visualising climate change in the Pacific islands

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I begin with our earth island; a concept made possible by the satellite technologies developed in the Cold War; a battle that, while largely invisible to the majority of the people of the globe, was violently propagated on the small atolls and great ocean of the Pacific. The myth of the island isolate, adapted by ecologists and anthropologists alike, helped to justify the detonation of hundreds of thermonuclear weapons in the atolls of the Marshall Islands and French Polynesia. In selecting the atolls for nuclear detonations, the island was treated as metonymic of our terraqueous globe. Blowing up the island was understood in a part-for-whole relationship in which one could make predictions for the destruction and irradiation of the earth. *Bravo*, a 15- megaton hydrogen weapon that detonated in the Pacific in 1954, might be seen as an originary event for the Anthropocene, in which the human destruction of an island might be scaled up to the earth itself (DeLoughrey, "The Myth").² The radiation from *Bravo* permeated the global atmosphere, creating the world's first modern 'environmental refugees' and catalyzed the field of atmospheric chemistry. Studying the nuclear irradiation of the global atmosphere led directly to the science of the Anthropocene. While the Pacific Islands were used as laboratories and thus were at the vanguard of new technologies of weaponry, high-speed cameras, color film, radiocarbon dating, and developments in ecology, the islands were consistently denied their imbrication with the globe, interpellated as "isolated" and "primitive" in the films and documents of the Atomic Energy Commission (DeLoughrey, "The Myth" 168, 175).

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² Operation Castle, a series of 6 nuclear explosions at Enewetak and Bikini in 1954, featured the notorious 15-megaton thermonuclear weapon Bravo, left a crater (or anti-island) 6,500 feet wide and 250 feet deep. Bravo covered the surrounding islands with radioactive strontium, cesium, and iodine, and became an ecological and political relations disaster. Bravo's fallout exposed hundreds of Marshall Islanders to nuclear radiation, contributing to countless miscarriages, leukemia deaths, thyroid cancers, and the kind of chromosome damage which knows no genealogical limit. It covered the neighboring island of Rongelap with "radioactive snow" and permanently displaced the Rongelapese from their homeland due to continuing lethal levels of Cesium 137, over 40 years later. Estimated at 1000 times the force of the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Bravo has been called the worst radiological disaster in history. See also Johnston and Barker, Boyer, Firth, Dean, Lang and Makay, and Teaiwa.

Island studies has long been concerned with this paradox in which tropical islands are depicted as isolated, and remote, and yet seem to be under constant surveillance, visualized and visited by the US military, the anthropologist, the filmmaker, and the tourist. This is made possible by colonial logics in which the metropole is figured as historical and temporal in contradistinction to the presumably atemporal colonies.³ Yet the discourse of isolation is also made possible by the naturalization of the sea, a practice of suppressing the world ocean as a vital material space constitutive to flows of empire, modernity, and globalization. Far from being a pure ‘natural’ space outside of history, the ocean is increasingly being recognized as a space from which to theorize our evolutionary past, and to model our climate futures. In the Anthropocene we recognize humans as a geological force, yet the ocean seems to be our proxy. This paper will engage the ways in which sea level rise has created a new oceanic imaginary for the Anthropocene, visible in climate change discourse and films, in the poetry produced in island spaces, and in visions of the planetary future.

New oceanic imaginaries

The humanities and social sciences have taken an *oceanic turn* which can be tied to a general trend to complicate the limits of the nation state through recourse to the complex trajectories of migration, diaspora, and the global flows of empire, capital, and culture. In examining the U.N. Convention of the Law of the Sea, cultural histories of the ocean, and the more recent patenting of sea life there are major geopolitical, environmental and even biopolitical reasons for this oceanic turn⁴ we are on the cusp of an entirely new development in this oceanic imaginary which is visible in work that is responding to the threat of sea level rise. This adds a new dimension to how we might theorize our relationship to the largest space on earth, which until recently for most, was imagined as always external to ordinary ambits. In other words, for most humans the ocean was understood as largely alien until sea level rise and catastrophic weather events such as hurricanes, tsunamis, and flooding brought it into so many homes.

With glacial melt and oceanic thermal expansion, our planetary future is becoming more oceanic. Sea level rise may be one of our greatest visible signs of planetary change, connecting the activity of the earth’s poles with the rest of the terrestrial world, producing a new sense of planetary scale and perhaps even interconnectedness through the rising of a world ocean. In some recent U.S. cultural productions, the ocean is a figure for apocalypse and terror, destabilizing social, cultural and national systems. An active, threatening ocean is evident in blockbuster Hollywood films such as *Noah* (dir. Darren Aronofsky, 2014) and *2012* (dir. Roland Emmerich, 2009) as well as scholarly books such as Brian Fagan’s *The Attacking Ocean* (2013). So while the Anthropocene locates humans as geological agents, one might also trace out a sensationalist discourse of “climate terror” deriving from an oceanic agent.

Twenty years ago, Epeli Hau’ofa published his influential essay *Our Sea of Islands*, arguing that the legacies of colonial belittlement that render the Pacific as “islands in a far sea” need to be reinvigorated by a more accurate and world-enlarging view (Hau’ofa 153). Instead of the narratives of small, vulnerable, and peripheral places, he argued, we must recognize the primacy of the largest

³ See also Fabian.

⁴ 630 million people live within 30 feet of the ocean. The current projections for sea level rise are a significant threat to the 10 percent of the world’s population that lives at 10 meters or below, as well as 13 percent of the world’s urban population. See also DeLoughrey, *Routes and Roots*, Helmreich, and Gornitz.

ocean on the planet which facilitated both the legacies of trans-Pacific voyaging as well as contemporary circuits of globalization, rendering the region as “a sea of islands” better known as Oceania. Hau’ofa’s work has made a tremendous contribution, reconfiguring methodologies for the humanities and social sciences as well as inspiring an arts movement at the Oceania Centre that he established at the University of the South Pacific in Fiji.

Pacific Island Studies, which is closely linked to indigenous discourses of embeddedness in the land, has been extensively engaged with the depictions of the ocean as a space of origins and of the future. For instance, the Hawaiian voyaging canoe *Hokulē’a* suggests the ways in which the regeneration of traditions (in this case non-instrument navigational knowledges transferred from Micronesia to Hawai’i) can be used to benefit new connections between the islands. It also aids science and a pedagogy of climate change, since NASA and other organizations support the *Hokulē’a*’s voyages to raise environmental consciousness. Hau’ofa has famously inscribed the voyaging traditions of the region as producing a shared sense of origins and one of regional destiny in the wake of migration and globalization.⁵ As such, the ocean has functioned in cosmological, historical, and evolutionary terms as a place of origins, and more recently, as human if not planetary future.

While Hau’ofa was a visionary, he could not have foreseen the ways in which climate change, particularly sea level rise, has transformed islands that are in fact threatened by the expansion of the sea, faced with a new era of carbon colonialism.⁶ In his address to the UN General Assembly in 2009, Federated States of Micronesia President Emanuel Mori invoked the history of Pacific voyaging and concluded that “sadly [...] the ocean that has always nurtured us is becoming the very instrument of our destruction” (Mori, no pag.). A new vocabulary is developing in Oceania in which words for climate change, which do not exist in indigenous languages, are being formed. New pedagogies, programs, and knowledges are being developed to communicate across a broad spectrum of those affected. Since the low lying atolls of the Marshall Islands, Kiribati, Tokelau, and Tuvalu are the first to feel the impact as the waters begin to rise, new maps of the Pacific are being drawn in which the smallest atolls are now attracting global attention, becoming once again signifiers for the globe’s future. Ironically, the globe displayed at the Copenhagen Climate Summit did not include them. In some media, these mappings reinvigorate colonial constructions of the islands as laboratories, Edens before the fall, and spaces in need of a type of salvage anthropology.

In the past year I have attended multiple conferences about climate change (in the Pacific) and the Anthropocene (in the U.S. and Europe). The conversations could not be more different and perhaps mutually unintelligible. One group speaks of the salinization of staple crops and water supplies, migration, culture, the land, the ancestors, family, and children. The other speaks of species, history, temporality, modernity, and the west. Broadly speaking, climate change discourse is concerned with embodied space, Anthropocene discourse is concerned with modalities of time. Yet these differences are fitting and I’d argue necessary, because claiming to speak of an enormous system like climate requires multiple narrative registers as well as scales. We know from the work of Barbara Adam and others that communicating environmental risks is to rely on the visibility of materiality, an effective form yet one that may detract from what is “latent and immanent” (Adam 12).⁷ Building upon Susan Sontag’s “aesthetics of disaster,” I turn here to what Julie Doyle calls the “aesthetics of the image” (Doyle 132) in climate change films about the Pacific. These are texts produced

⁵ See his collected essays *We are the ocean* (2008). This is explored at length in my book *Routes and roots*.

⁶ See Agarwal and Narain, and Ziser and Sze.

⁷ See also Doyle.

(primarily) by the white settler cultures of North America, Australia, and Aotearoa New Zealand, which I will argue can be read in terms of a new era of what I call *salvage environmentalism*.

Visualising climate change

One of the contradictions pointed out by scholars of climate change is that the science, which measures the deep time of the earth's systems and makes projections far into the future, is *not* commiserate with the everyday experience of human communities and their observations of weather.⁸ This creates a bifurcation between the experience of place and time, and to go back to the opening of this paper, a break down in the metonymic relationship between part and whole figured through island and earth. Sheila Jasanoff remarks, "climate facts arise from *impersonal observation* whereas meanings emerge from *embedded experience*" (Jasanoff 233). Moreover, climate "is spatially unbounded. It is everywhere and nowhere, hence not easily accessible to imaginations rooted in specific places" (237). In order to cognitively bring the scales of climate and weather together, the visualization of climate change, which may produce both evidence and empathy, becomes crucial. Therefore the distribution of images of stranded polar bears on ice floes, or Pacific Islanders wading through flooded villages, creates a new oceanic imaginary and becomes the means by which many are able to recognize, empathize, and perhaps even become inspired to mitigate climate change.⁹

Global warming is a long cumulative effect of industrial capitalism, what Rob Nixon calls "slow violence," which exceeds the narrative boundaries of the temporal pace of modernity.¹⁰ Thus these Islanders become the embodied figures for the "articulated stress" of climate change as well as "ventriloquists for a western crisis of nature" (Farbotko and Lazrus 383). In keeping with a part-for-the-whole-relationship that figures the small tropical island as the world, the atoll signifies enormous scalar density. First, this is evident in a spatial collapse between earth and atoll. Second, it is also evident in a temporal elongation in which the premodern past is harnessed to our global warming future. This is in keeping with previous environmental discourse in which "the future and past are presented as imminent in the present" (Harré, Brockmeier, and Mühlhäusler 7). However, this has different implications for the representation of the embodied indigenous subject. Thus in the works I will discuss the 'native' as representative of the human past, depicted in a close relationship with nonhuman nature, especially the sea. The island becomes a symbol for the planetary future, in that the threatened atolls are represented as the 'canaries in the coal mine' of atmospheric pollution (Farbotko 2). Thus space – the island – enters the future and therefore temporality via climate change. Problematically, the figure of the indigenous islander – who is associated with lost culture – is represented in atemporal terms akin to the logic of what Renato Rosaldo has termed "imperialist nostalgia."¹¹

It is this concern of visualizing climate change, and bringing those who are the most impacted by sea level rise to the largest greenhouse gas emitters, *aka* the United States, that inspired the 2010 *Water is Rising* performance event, an enormous undertaking by one of my UCLA colleagues that employed the arts in the service of raising awareness of the ongoing US "dispossession of the atmosphere."¹²

⁸ See e.g. Serres and Chakrabarty.

⁹ See also Doyle; Dobrin and Morey, and O'Neill and Smith.

¹⁰ See also Doyle and Adam.

¹¹ See Rosaldo's essay of the same title.

¹² This expression has been coined in Liverman's essay of the same title, "Conventions of climate change: Constructions of danger and the dispossession of the atmosphere" (2009).

My colleague raised funds to support the recruitment of dancers from the Pacific Island nations Kiribati, Tokelau, and Tuvalu to share both their traditional and new dance forms they had developed to raise consciousness of the ways in which the salinization of their taro beds, flooding of their schools and homes, and loss of their ancestral burial grounds were making atoll life untenable. In an era of American-style climate change denial, the Islanders of the *Water is Rising* event became the visible evidence of the reality of global warming.

I first met the *Water is Rising* dance troupe at UCLA, their first stop on a tour that would take them to universities across the country. As I crossed the quad to the building in which we were to host a roundtable on climate change, I could see the dance troupe sitting in a large circle in the grass outside the building, dressed in t-shirts, lavalavas, jeans and flip flops, playing guitars and singing Bob Marley songs. When the preview to the performance began an hour later they performed in the style of their homes and languages (without English translation), and were introduced as travelling from some of the most isolated islands of the Pacific. The dances, which represent complex knowledge systems in the Pacific, were presented as entertainment. The juxtaposition of reggae-singing youth to the performance of an isolated indigeneity was striking, and something I had already encountered in the UCLA marketing of the event. We can see this by comparing two images of Mikaele Maiava, the artistic director of the troupe from Tokelau. On the *Water is Rising* site we learn that he studied overseas, worked for nearly a decade for the UN, and has been active in various international indigenous fora on the environment and climate change. In our campus newspaper, his name is misspelled and his ample bio note is reduced to “a native of Tokelau” (Lee). In fact, the first version of this piece referred to him simply as “a native of the South Pacific” until I complained to the editor.

This got me thinking about how North American audiences were receiving Pacific Islanders as the harbingers of climate change, habitually rendered as figures of an isolated, natural and nature-loving culture that were being appropriated to critique American petroculturalism. I turned to the remarkable output of documentaries on the topic that focus on the atolls and low lying islands of the Pacific. This begins with the 2000 film *Rising Waters: Global Warming and the Fate of the Pacific Islands* which is a good educational and historical film featuring scholars like Patrick Nunn. Yet after the events of 9/11 we see a shift to *salvage environmentalism*. The documentary *Paradise Drowned: Tuvalu, the Disappearing Nation* was released in 2001 and features the caption “see the world’s most *endangered* country.” There are ample similarities in the film posters, all of which feature the ocean. In 2004 and 2005 *The Disappearance of Tuvalu: Trouble in Paradise* (2004) and *Time and Tide* (2005) were released, followed by *There Once Was an Island* (2010) which focused on the island Taku in Papua New Guinea, and finally *The Hungry Tide* (2011) which turns to Kiribati.¹³ This particular genre begins to solidify over the years and while there is some diversity in those one or two films that mention colonial history or nuclear testing, or show testimonies and struggles at the 2009 Copenhagen Climate Summit, generally speaking these documentaries tell the story in predictable ways. The films focus almost exclusively on village life, feature ample images of the ocean, islanders fishing, children running on the beach, sunsets, palm trees, the camera person at work on the island, images of flooded homes, and interviews with subjects who are considering migration to metropolitan centers of Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. Atoll life is quite beautifully imagined in the romantic light of the setting sun over the ocean, reflecting what the film suggests is a dying culture. This dying culture is at once the death of an untouched pastoral past (in the tradition of the colonial South Seas idyll) as well as the planet’s future. The keywords of the films, evidenced by their titles are: paradise,

¹³ See also Chambers and Chambers for an overview of the films on Tuvalu.

disappearance, and endangerment, remarkably like the kind of extinction narratives in documentaries about the loss of nonhuman species. In recovering the “vanishing native,” the filmmaker is positioned in a long history of salvage anthropology, utilizing the realism of documentary film to depict a kind of mourning that we might liken to “imperialist nostalgia.” This nostalgia is particular to a long history of colonial South Seas discourse, in which travel narratives, novels, paintings, and later films aestheticize an Edenic island lifestyle imagined outside of modernity, history, empire, and labor. This trope of the island tropics is evident in the following promotion material on the *Time and Tide* website:

The heart wrenching and beautiful film TIME AND TIDE is like one of Gauguin’s rare, found-object sculptures, simultaneously celebrating a precious, edenic time and place while calling attention to the fact that it is perhaps lost forever. – Rob Bindler

For instance, in the trailer of the film *King Tide: The Sinking of Tuvalu* (dir. Juriaan Booij 2007), an English speaking narrator depicts the nation of Tuvalu as “small,” “remote,” endangered, and sinking, and covers all the basic aesthetic and informational ground of these ‘climate nostalgia’ films: the sea, fishing communities, children in the water, village life and flooding, testimony of increasing tides, evidence of garden flooding, traditional dance, migration narratives, a white male scientist, and a Tuvaluan testifying that they can trust in god because he already told Noah earthly flooding was over. The only thing missing in this particular clip is island music and the sunset.

These documentaries trade in what Susan Sontag referred to as the “imagination of disaster,” but they differ in their engagement with modernity. In her critique of science fiction films, Sontag was focused on what she called “a dispassionate aesthetic view of destruction and violence—a technological view” that we might see in films like *2012* (45). In contrast, these climate change films specifically bracket out modernity and technology from atoll life, visibly depicting slow violence and a narrative of mourning about the loss of a subsistence mode of living in which capitalism is only distantly implicated. Rosaldo defines imperialist nostalgia as when “agents of colonialism long for the very forms of life they intentionally altered or destroyed” (108). Let me quote from him at length in order to show how different imperialist narrative forms become rekindled in an era of carbon colonialism:

Imperialist nostalgia revolves around a paradox: a person kills somebody, and then mourns the victim. In more attenuated form, someone deliberately alters a form of life, and then regrets that things have not remained as they were prior to the intervention. At one more remove, people destroy their environment, and then they worship nature. In any of its versions, imperialist nostalgia uses a pose of ‘innocent yearning’ both to capture people’s imaginations and to conceal its complicity with often brutal domination. [...] ‘We’ (who believe in progress) valorize innovation and then yearn for more stable worlds, whether these reside in our own past, in other cultures, or in the conflation of the two (108).

This yearning, in western aesthetic terms, is elegy, a form where *nature* figures as scenery or backdrop, “an analogue for what has been lost” (Morton 253). As Timothy Morton points out, when the poet – or filmmaker – tries to mourn the loss of nature itself, the “sounding board [...] becomes the object of lamentation” creating a shift from mourning (which can locate the lost object) to melancholia, without a method of redressing loss (251). Writing about climate change

Morton notes that (western) “ecological elegy weeps for that which *will have passed* given a continuation of the current state of affairs” (254). In contrast, these films weep for a loss of *culture* that figures as a loss of the *environment* (254). These films complicate Morton’s argument; they are able to circumvent this issue of the lost object by using *Pacific Islanders* as the figures for nature, reinvigorating a well-worn colonial trope. Therefore the continental viewer mourns the loss of atoll culture and life worlds as an analogue for a destruction of a global environment. By bracketing out empire, capitalism, and carbon colonialism, these films trade on a *salvage environmentalism* that recuperates a historic and nostalgic nature by detemporalizing the Pacific Islander, while suppressing the issue of the viewer’s complicity.

Hau’ofa has encouraged us to examine the oceanic contours of a “sea of islands,” and climate change has made that a necessity. But this oceanic imaginary of sea level rise, at least for most of these films, has fallen into the well-worn tread of, to draw from Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*.¹⁴ The ocean, which has long figured in the Pacific Islands as a means of subsistence, origins, cosmology and regional connection now becomes a figure for destructive change. Rosaldo reminds us that ‘salvage work’ is meant to record a culture before it disappears in the wake of modernity, and in this case modernity is paradoxically nature and anthropogenic climate change. The salvage narrative that once helped to authorize funding for a generation of anthropologists in the Pacific under British, French, and American empires is now catalyzing a new generation of journalists, film makers, and scholars who fly across the world to descend on Kiribati, Tuvalu, and Tokelau to interrogate the residents about nothing but climate change (Farbotko “Tuvalu”).

Salvage work has the possibility to “criticize destructive intrusions of imperialism and regimes” and can be used to critique the imperial center (Rosaldo 31). Rather than dismissing these films altogether, which is tempting, I suggest that this form of oceanic imaginary, as misrepresentative as it might be of the islands and peoples themselves, might utilize an effective narrative strategy for those people, to quote from Michel Serres, who “are indifferent to climate except during vacations when they rediscover the world in a clumsy arcadian way” (28). Salvage environmental films reflect a new idiom of a well-worn trope, appealing to those who “pollute what they don’t know, which rarely hurts them and never concerns them” (28). To that end, the few of these films that juxtapose atoll life with the ways in which community leaders are fighting for environmental justice and the mitigation of greenhouse gas emissions provide clearer ways for some members of the audience to position the islands *in history* rather than always distant in an irrecoverable pastoral past.

“Tell them”: Weaving the strands of obligation

There is a sense of *déjà-vu* in some climate change discourses, a point Mike Hulme has argued in tracing out the return of climate determinism. Up until the early twentieth century, a colonial version of climate determinism reduced the peoples of the tropics to a torrid and languid climate, claiming they were incapable of producing civilization or modernity. The salvage environmental films I’ve mentioned also limit Pacific Islanders to responding to or resisting the modernity of climate change. Ironically, nature, or the weather, becomes a modern historical agent capable of producing change while the “Native” can “either resist or yield to the new but cannot *produce* it” (Clifford 122, original emphasis). The new form of climate determinism, Hulme argues, can be seen in how climate science modelling is being used as a universal determiner of political, social, and cultural futures. Climate

¹⁴ See Lévi-Strauss’ famous 1955 travelogue of the same title.

reductionism is a scientific trend that extracts climate from a myriad of variable factors to predict migration, economics, disease, state infrastructural collapse, civil war, and other calamities without engaging other disciplines or studies, say for instance the humanities and social sciences. Oddly, in this era of “neo-environmental determinism” climate becomes variable, but human behavior is not. As seen in the salvage environmental films, “the possibilities of human agency are relegated to footnotes, the changing cultural norms and practices made invisible, the creative potential of the human imagination ignored” (Hulme 256).

For all the tremendous academic production around climate change and the Anthropocene in metropolitan centers, it is not the determining discourse elsewhere. Perhaps not surprisingly, climate change is not the major subject of Pacific Island literary, cultural, and visual production.¹⁵ When it is addressed it is largely through the initiative of development and arts grants that originate from the larger carbon emitters, like the United States and Australia. However, there’s one poem I’d like to conclude with because it offers a far more complex narrative form that does not idealize a South Seas pastoral, and suggests the webs of obligation that connect us across the seas. Moreover, it brings us back, movingly, to the disjuncture between the embodied experience of weather, and the universalizing discourse of climate. The root of obligation, Michel Serres writes, is *ligare* – to bond, to tie, to weave (Serres 47). I conclude my paper with an alternative aesthetic of sea level rise by the Marshallese poet Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner. This performance, recorded at the 2012 Olympics Poetry Parnassus, does not employ an aerial ‘god’s eye’ view of the tropical atoll but rather places the poet high above the audience, with the cold stormy skies of London swirling behind her. Her poem invokes some of the same imagery that we have seen in the documentaries: “fine white sand,” “sweet harmonies [...] of songs”, and “papaya golden sunsets,” but she immediately juxtaposes what might initially be considered idyllic with everyday modernities, like an island “clogged with chugging cars,” and “styrofoam cups of koolaid.”

Jetnil-Kijiner’s emphasis here, in foregrounding a narrative of a gifted basket, is about weaving together connections and obligations across the Pacific. These bonds are legally established with the “compact of free association” Micronesian states have with the United States, which grew out of the 1946 American annexation of Micronesia in order to develop a base for the U.S. military and to conduct three decades of nuclear testing which poisoned and displaced thousands of Marshallese.¹⁶ In a shift from irradiation to sea level rise, this colonial relationship between the U.S. and the Marshalls is producing new ecological effects. In speaking about the imminent threat of losing the islands to the sea and framing it as a matter of national security to the UN Security Council in 2013, Marshallese Senator and Minister of Foreign Affairs Tony de Brum observes that “the people of the Marshall Islands are not strangers to being moved around in the name of somebody else’s peace and security. Displacement as a means to take land for military activities is not something new to us” (De Brum, n. pag.).

In her poem, Jetnil-Kijiner offers her American friends a gift, handcrafted jewels from the sea, “black pearls” and “cowry shell” earrings, placed in hand-woven baskets, products of women’s love and labor. Inside this basket is a message for the reader/viewer to pass on: “you tell them,” she implores, where these gifts came from, the Marshall Islands, and asks the reader to “show them where it is on a map.” Deeply influenced by Hau’ofa’s work on Pacific voyaging cultures and networks of trade and kinship, she declares an embodied relationship in that “we are the ocean,”

¹⁵ See also Nunn, “The end of the Pacific?”

¹⁶ See also Johnston and Barker.

invoking the title of Hau'ofa's essay collection. She fashions her poetry as a basket, which in turn is a metaphor for the island. Emphasizing the ways in which the earrings and the basket she has made for her audience travel, like her words, the poet creates new webs of obligation in an alternative vision of sea level rise. I leave the poet to conclude:

Tell Them¹⁷

I prepared the package
 for my friends in the states the dangling earrings woven
 into half moons black pearls glinting like an eye in a storm of tight spirals the baskets
 sturdy, also woven brown cowry shells shiny intricate mandalas
 shaped by calloused fingers Inside the basket
 a message:
 Wear these earrings to parties
 to your classes and meetings
 to the grocery store, the corner store and while riding the bus
 Store jewelry, incense, copper coins and curling letters like this one
 in this basket
 and when others ask you where you got this
 you tell them
 they're from the Marshall Islands
 show them where it is on a map tell them we are a proud people
 toasted dark brown as the carved ribs of a tree stump
 tell them we are descendents
 of the finest navigators in the world tell them our islands were dropped from a basket
 carried by a giant
 tell them we are the hollow hulls of canoes as fast as the wind slicing through the pacific sea
 we are wood shavings
 and drying pandanus leaves and sticky bwiros¹⁸ at kemems¹⁹
 tell them we are sweet harmonies
 of grandmothers mothers aunts and sisters songs late into night
 tell them we are whispered prayers the breath of God
 a crown of fushia flowers encircling aunty mary's white sea foam hair
 tell them we are styrofoam cups of koolaid red waiting patiently for the ilomij²⁰
 tell them we are papaya golden sunsets bleeding into a glittering open sea
 we are skies uncluttered
 majestic in their sweeping landscape we are the ocean
 terrifying and regal in its power
 tell them we are dusty rubber slippers swiped
 from concrete doorsteps
 we are the ripped seams
 and the broken door handles of taxis
 we are sweaty hands shaking another sweaty hand in heat tell them
 we are days

¹⁷ Reprinted with friendly permission from the University of Arizona Press.

¹⁸ Preserved breadfruit.

¹⁹ First birthday party.

²⁰ A wake, to pay respects.

and nights hotter
than anything you can imagine
tell them we are little girls with braids cartwheeling beneath the rain
we are shards of broken beer bottles burrowed beneath fine white sand we are children
flinging
like rubber bands
across a road clogged with chugging cars tell them
we only have one road
and after all this
tell them about the water how we have seen it rising
flooding across our cemeteries gushing over the sea walls
and crashing against our homes tell them what it's like
to see the entire ocean__level__with the land tell them
we are afraid
tell them we don't know of the politics
or the science
but tell them we see
what is in our own backyard tell them that some of us
are old fishermen who believe that God made us a promise
some of us
are more skeptical of God
but most importantly tell them we don't want to leave
we've never wanted to leave and that we
are nothing without our islands.

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