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Seen and Unseen in the Marshall Islands:

Representations of Slow Violence in the Poetry of Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner

For many, the word *violence* brings images of war, bombs, and blood to mind. However, violence is not always visceral and visible. In recent years, there has been a growing recognition that violence can take many different forms, including what the environmental humanities scholar Rob Nixon has termed *slow violence.* This describes harm that is pervasive, structural and "hidden in plain sight," often in the form of slow moving and very complex environmental crises like climate change and toxic contamination (Cahill and Pain 1059). While lethal to people and the planet, the uneven geographic and temporal distribution of this sort of violence presents significant representational challenges, which in turn has inhibited adequate responses to it (Fisher). As such, giving "imaginative definition" to environmental crises becomes key to addressing them (Nixon 6). One proposed way to draw attention to the existence and lethality of "attritional catastrophes" (Nixon 7) is through literary arts, something that the Marshallese poet and activist Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner has done in her work. In the following essay, building upon both Nixon's concept and the rich analyses of Michelle Keown, Angela L. Robinson, and other scholars of indigenous literature, I examine Jetñil-Kijiner's work as a narrative of slow violence as it is experienced in the South Pacific. Drawing pieces from her 2017 collection *Iep Jāltok: Poems from a Marshallese Daughter*, I explore Jetñil-Kijiner's work as an exemplification of poetry's power to make the slow and structural violence of environmental destruction legible,

emotionally resonant, and urgent to global audiences. The essay demonstrates the ways that her poems trouble both the invisibility and the interconnectedness of nuclear imperialism, intergenerational health crises, and climate change in the Marshall Islands, and highlights the importance of evocative literary depictions of unevenly seen violence.

The term and concept of *slow violence* was first developed by Rob Nixon in his seminal 2011 book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. In the text, Nixon describes how environmental damage, wrought by the likes of climate change, industrial accidents, development projects, resource extraction, and wars, causes lethal harm to communities and ecosystems around the world, especially in the global south—and yet this violence escapes much attention, in part because it lacks any immediate spectacle, and many of the "casualties are postponed, often for generations" (3). It can, for instance, take decades for toxic drift and biomagnification processes to become readily apparent. Similarly, existential crises like melting sea ice and ecosystem collapse are imperceptible to a lot of people because the processes happen slowly and unevenly. These problems are nevertheless very deadly and are often deeply felt in vulnerable, and economically and politically disadvantaged, communities (Fisher). Yet because there is a long temporal delay and invisible quality to these harms, remedial action and political accountability are often continuously deferred (Nixon 9). As such, it becomes crucial to shed light on such problems in order to address them, which can require "creative ways of drawing public attention to catastrophic acts that are low in instant spectacle but high in long-term effects" (Nixon 10). According to Nixon, the work of "writer-activists" is particularly important in the project of illuminating and addressing the causes and effects of slow violence (5).

One such writer-activist is Kathy Jetn̄il-Kijiner. Since the very beginning of her career as a poet, she has been concerned with (in)visibility and has been relatively well-positioned to

explore such terrain. Born in the Marshallese capital Majuro in 1989, Jetñil-Kijiner is well-attuned to the existence and nature of slow violence and overlapping environmental and health crises, in part because her long-colonized homeland served as a primary atmospheric and underwater test site for nuclear weapons and today is one of the nations most threatened by the warming global climate. The Republic of the Marshall Islands is comprised of 29 coral atolls and five islands located between Hawaii and Australia in the greater Micronesian region. In the years following World War II, the island group was part of a United Nations trust territory administered by the United States, having been seized by the Allies from the Empire of Japan (which had controlled the chain of islands after their initial colonization by Spain and Germany) (Marcoux 98). Under control of the American government, the US military built a base and a major intercontinental ballistic missile testing range on the islands (Marcoux 95), as well as the "Pacific Proving Grounds," where it conducted 67 nuclear tests across the atolls—including the *Castle Bravo* test in 1954, the first test of a thermonuclear weapon and the most powerful device ever detonated by the United States (Johnson and Barker 17). A perfect example of what slow violence entails, this nuclear testing permanently exiled thousands of people from their ancestral lands, contaminated land, water, and food sources with radioactive fallout, and contributed to significant and well-documented health and reproductive problems that local populations continue to experience to this day (Johnson and Barker 173-79). Now an independent country in free political association with the United States, the low-lying islands are facing new anthropomorphic environmental troubles today as the planet quickly warms due to rising greenhouse gas emissions. Prolonged droughts are reducing supplies of freshwater and—given that the atolls have a mean elevation of just two metres above sea level—oceanic rise poses a particularly existential and immediate threat to the Marshalls (Ahlgren et al. 70).

Jetn̄il-Kijiner spent much of her adolescence and young adulthood living in the United States, and, as such, is well-aware that few outside the South Pacific region understand the gravity of such problems (Keown 593-94). Indeed, it was that sense of invisibility which prompted her to experiment with spoken word poetry in the first place. Drawing upon long-standing Indigenous oral traditions and a rich body of Pacific anti-nuclear protest literature, Jetn̄il-Kijiner first began to perform her poems "as a means by which to address the lack of awareness among Americans about the history of nuclear testing and other facets of US imperialism in the Marshall Islands" (Keown 940). Today, she has returned to the Marshall Islands where she now works in writing, education, and activism, often addressing global forums like the United Nations and collaborating closely with her mother, Hilda Heine, who was the president of the Marshall Islands between 2016 and 2020 (Milne). Jetn̄il-Kijiner continues to centre her work upon issues affecting her native isles, and, as the back cover of her 2017 collection *Iep Jāltok* notes, she has also become the Marshall Islands' first published poet.

The Chuukanese scholar Angela L. Robinson (321) argues that one of the greatest powers of Jetn̄il-Kijiner's poetry is how it introduces global society to the concerns of small and often-ignored Oceanic nations. We can see such power demonstrated in the poems "Tell Them" and "History Project," in which Jetn̄il-Kijiner carefully guides her audiences' gaze to places and histories of which they may be largely unaware. Both poems utilize educational language to inform people of the geography, culture, and history of the Marshall Islands. In "Tell Them," Jetn̄il-Kijiner prepares a package of Marshallese woven baskets and hand-made earrings to send to friends in the United States and directs the recipients to tell others in the US that the items are "*from the Marshall Islands* / show them where it is on a map" (64). Recognizing that few outside the South Pacific know much about the Micronesian nation, Jetn̄il-Kijiner attempts to help her

largely American audience overcome what Nixon terms "superpower parochialism" shaped by "a long-standing indifference…to the foreign" (35). She does this by telling stories: of her ancestors ("the finest navigators"), the natural environment (with its "papaya golden sunset bleeding / into a glittering open sea"), the people (including "little girls with braids / cartwheeling beneath the rain") and their strong connection to the place (noting that "we / are nothing / without our islands") (64-67). The strong imagery and powerful "tell them" refrain throughout the poem call upon the global public to better understand this part of the world and bear witness to the experiences of these islands' inhabitants.

While "Tell Them" brings visibility to the islands themselves, the poem "History Project" provides an education on what the postcolonial literary scholar Michelle Keown (585) and others have termed "nuclear imperialism"—a crucial layer of slow violence affecting the Marshalls (Shiga 281). In the piece, Jetñil-Kijiner's narrator describes a high-school project focused on the nuclear testing conducted across the archipelago and its lingering effects. "Time to learn my own history" (20) she writes, as she chronicles how the American military appropriated Bikini and Enewetak atolls for atomic testing, coercively removing the inhabitants and incinerating the islands (Bahng 45). The poem recounts statistics, military jargon, and the words American political leaders used to justify their actions. For instance, Jetñil-Kijiner quotes Henry Kissinger's rather callous reasoning for using the Marshall Islands as a nuclear test site, which was that there are only "*90,000 people out there. Who / gives a damn?*" (20). These disturbing justifications are layered atop visceral descriptions of "the lived horrors of the nuclear aftermath" (Starr 126) caused by the widespread nuclear fallout from the detonations (Keown 591). Jetñil-Kijiner paints images of acute radiation poisoning and long-lasting reproductive harm, describing "a boy, peeled skin" and "jelly babies / tiny beings with no bones / skin—as red

as tomatoes" (20). The slowly unfolding violence of nuclear imperialism is thus brought into clear view and transformed into something of a tragic spectacle.

The horrific descriptions may come as a shock to those reading the poems (or watching performances of them online), but it is clear that the young Marshallese speaker is unsurprised by the imperial roots and corporeal harms of the weapons testing. Indeed, early on the poem, Jetñil-Kijiner's speaker makes a germane but very disquieting point: "I already knew all this" (20). Such statements complicate the supposedly "spectacle deficient" and "out of sight" (Nixon 47, 2) nature of slow violence. As the British geographer Thom Davies notes (1), it is always crucial to ask: to *whom* are the causes and effects of slow violence out of sight?

Jetñil-Kijiner's poems indicate that the "long dyings" (Nixon 2) caused by slow violence are certainly not out of sight for most Marshallese. While the American government long withheld pertinent information about the extent of the radioactive fallout and denied that atomic testing caused adverse health effects (Barker 377; Duke 437), it would be difficult for people living on the islands to ignore the damage caused by years of high-yield bombing. If the combined explosive power of the 67 bombs dropped on the Marshalls were averaged out over the 12-year test period, it would equal 1.6 Hiroshima-sized explosions per day (Marcoux 99). Today, there are deep craters where inhabited islands once stood (Marcoux 108), and parts of the country remain more radioactive than the Chernobyl exclusion zone (Abella et al. 15432; Rust). Dozens of forms of cancer have been linked to the testing and thyroid conditions are common, as are miscarriages and birth defects (Shiga 298, 300; Zak). In her filmed performance of a poem titled "Anointed," Jetñil-Kijiner recounts "the lies we've been told: / *It's not radioactive any more* / *Your illnesses are normal* / *You're fine*. / *You're fine*." Such falsehoods, which have been purposefully used to make the harm experienced by Marshall Islanders invisible (see Hogue 210-

216), carry a particularly striking weight as Jetñil-Kijiner recites the lines standing atop the concrete "tomb" on Runit Island in the Enewetak atoll. The domed piece of concrete, constructed in the 1970s, covers a porous coral crater containing 3.1 million cubic feet of radioactive detritus including "lethal amounts of plutonium" and additional nuclear waste from the Nevada test site (Marcoux 108). The Marshall Islanders were told by American authorities that the encasement would last for 2000 years, but today contaminants are leaking into the surrounding sea and affecting nearby communities (Marcoux 109; Rust). The effects of that contamination are detailed across Jetñil-Kijiner's work, including in "History Project" where the high-school presentation is capped off with a visualization of "my people's death by cancer / on flow charts / in 3-D" (23). The passage emphasizes that even the most slow-moving environmental and public-health crises are very apparent in many Indigenous communities across the global south.

Further to that, Jetñil-Kijiner's poetry also narrates very *personal* understandings of the corporeal trauma of slow violence (Keown 585). As Davies notes, "for those who live in the midst of toxic geographies and polluted landscapes… slow violence is not necessarily a 'formless threat' but can be a very real and often tangible brutality" (3). In many of Jetñil-Kijiner's poems, she demonstrates how that very tangible brutality affects her community and those closest to her. In the piece "Bursts of Bianca," for instance, she writes about how she, along with "most Marshallese / can say they've mastered the language of cancer" (40) due to direct exposure to nuclear fallout on some atolls and long-term indirect exposure through the entirety of the county (Duke 428). As she describes the ultimately fatal leukemia diagnosis of her niece, the titular Bianca, she writes that "this is not uncommon / You remind yourself / This situation? / Not so rare" (39). As the poem contrasts Bianca's warm "deepdeep eyes deepdeep dimples" with the chilly way that "a feeding tube snakes / into her nose," the public-health

implications of nuclear imperialism are made viscerally real and emotionally devastating. And even though Jetn̄il-Kijiner and Bianca do not directly address “the cancers that shadow” the Marshallese in relation to “the effects of nuclear testing / Or colonization” (40) in the poem, the causal relationship is implicitly recognized both in this particular piece and in Marshallese society more broadly.

While scholars have taken note of how Jetn̄il-Kijiner represents slow violence in her writing, few have also considered how she illuminates the layered relationship between slow violence and structural violence in her work. Structural violence can take many unique shapes but in its most basic form the term refers to *suffering caused by the denial of basic needs* (Galtung 169). The concept, developed by the peace studies scholar Johann Galtung in the late 1960s, is intimately related to slow violence, and some scholars have pointed out that the two forms of violence can often be mutually reinforcing (Davies 6). I argue that we can see such dynamics play out in Jetn̄il-Kijiner’s video poem “Islands Dropped From a Basket,” in which she demonstrates how cancer rates among the Marshallese are exacerbated by inadequate public healthcare available on the islands. “In the hospitals back home,” Jetn̄il-Kijiner says, “the wards are always full” with “rats / running outside the doors.” For the Marshallese living in the United States, the prospect of receiving proper care for radiation-related illnesses is not much better. Though the Compact of Free Association signed between the US and the Marshall Islands in 1986 stipulated that the American government provide the Marshallese with access to health services, welfare reform legislation passed by the US Congress in the 1990s stripped islanders of any access to Medicare or Medicaid (McElfish et al. 638; Shiga 300). Jetn̄il-Kijiner relates the ongoing impact of this structural discrimination, recounting the tale of a Bikini Islander whose “parents grandparents siblings / all of them died / from cancer” now himself attempting to access

cancer treatment in Oregon. He cannot, she says, as he has been “disqualified for years / due to state issues with health care.” While Medicaid coverage for Marshall Islanders in the US has been reinstated since the publication of this particular poem, the health and well-being of the islanders continues to be impacted by structural inequities, racism, and lack of funding, which compounds the negative effects of environmental damage (Diamond; Willis and McElfish 680-681; World Health Organization).

On top of the sedimented layers of slow and structural violence already examined, another devastating environmental crisis is currently unfolding in the Marshall Islands, around the world, and in Jetñil-Kijiner’s work: climate change. Climate issues are a frequent subject of Jetñil-Kijiner’s poems—indeed, she may be most well-known for her work tackling the topic, especially after she addressed the UN Climate Leaders Summit in New York in 2014 (Robinson 321). She often shows how the danger posed by rising seas is intimately intertwined with other forms of slow violence in the Marshalls, including disease caused by nuclear testing and inadequate health care. “On Kili island / the tides were underestimated,” Jetñil-Kijiner writes in the piece “Two Degrees,” going on to describe how “patients sleeping in a clinic / a nuclear history threaded into their bloodlines woke / to a wild water world” (78). While climate change threatens all parts of the world, it poses a relatively immediate threat to certain areas of the Marshalls, where seasonal high tides have been causing increasing amounts of damage in recent years (Bordner and Ferguson). The highest point in the entire archipelago is only 10 metres above sea level and, according to many predictions, “sea-level rise, intensifying storms, coral bleaching, and changing precipitation patterns will make large swatches of the country uninhabitable in the medium term” (Rudiak-Gould 263-64).

Given the short timeline to mitigate the worst effects of global warming, Jetñil-Kijiner infuses many of her poems about the changing climate with a tremendous urgency. Already, as she writes in "Tell Them," you can "see the entire ocean__level__with the land" (60) in the Marshall Islands. For these coral atolls and islets, even the smallest disturbance of environmental equilibriums can bring devastating consequences, as noted in poems such as "Two Degrees." "At 2 degrees my islands / will already be underwater," Jetñil-Kijiner says of the level of warming typically accepted as a benchmark in international climate negotiations (77). Such targets, she notes, treat places like the Marshalls—which look on a map like "just crumbs" —as something "you dust off the table, wipe / your hands clean of" (77). But her poems remind the world that the islands are not crumbs; they are important ecosystems and homes, places where people have lived for generations. As the rising tides threaten to swallow the slivers of land and permanently exile people who have already been displaced by multiple iterations of colonialism and militarization, Jetñil-Kijiner reiterates that "we don't want to leave / we've never wanted to leave" because "we / are nothing without our islands" ("Tell Them" 66-67). And throughout her poems, she makes a powerful argument that the whole world must act in solidarity with those on islands "not yet / under water" and treat the problem of climate change with the seriousness it deserves. "If my islands don't survive / just who / do you think / will be next?" she asks in the video poem "The Butterfly Thief." Observing that climate change knows no borders and that our fates are intertwined, Jetñil-Kijiner ends the poem with a reminder to her global audience that "if I die / I'm taking you with me."

Overall, Jetñil-Kijiner's spoken word poems and written work weave a complex but lucid narrative of how slow, structural, and overlapping forms of violence show up in the South Pacific, and demonstrate the educational value of poetry. Her work illustrates how art can be

used to teach people about ignored or forgotten histories and geographies of imperialism, militarization, and disease, among other topics, and to help people both *see* and *feel* these problems in tangible ways. She challenges the notion that slow violence is entirely invisible, showing in evocative poems like "Bursts of Bianca," "Anointed" and "The Butterfly Thief" that gradually unfolding environmental catastrophes are both plainly seen and corporeally experienced, daily, in places like the Marshall Islands. As Nixon says, "writing can challenge perceptual habits that downplay the damage slow violence inflicts and bring into imaginative focus apprehensions that elude sensory corroboration" (15) and there is no doubt that Jetn̄il-Kijiner's writing does just that. In poems such as "History Project" and "Tell Them," she illuminates the complex roots of nuclear imperialism while also showing how atomic testing—a process typically understood in fairly abstract terms—has inflicted personally-experienced violence on the Marshallese community. Similarly, "Islands Dropped From a Basket" and "Two Degrees" demonstrate how different types of violence may reinforce each other, and highlight the urgent need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to mitigate the worst effects of climate change. One may rightly point out that poetry in and of itself cannot do much to solve such urgent and complex situations, but Jetn̄il-Kijiner's legible narratives of slow violence show that the literary arts can play a role in the project of addressing environmental crises. Poems and other types of literature can, for instance, bring unevenly seen issues to the fore, provide much-needed education on environmental issues, forge stronger global solidarities, and prompt audiences to try to develop the capacity to face and respond to problems that often go unnoticed and untreated. Such prompts are incredibly important and very necessary these days—after all, as Jetn̄il-Kijiner notes, if we do not address the crises already affecting places like the Marshall Islands, soon it will be too late for all of us.

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