The Impending Future of an Uprooted Generation: An Experimental Semi-Fiction

ELIKA ZAMANI

MA OF ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES IN URBAN & REGIONAL PLANNING
YORK UNIVERSITY, TORONTO, CANADA

This semi-fiction piece begins with a personal story about Syria and the Syrian migration crisis, then moves to shed light on the lives of the Marshall Islands residents, who will become climate migrants in the near future if Climate Change advances at the current rate. The following section explores the life and struggles of a real Marshallese activist. It is followed by a future-casting narrative 30 years into the future, when her child (now grown up) has to tackle migration issues on her own, along with other Climate-Change-induced havoc in society.

KEY WORDS Displacement, Syrian Migration Crisis, Climate Change, Forced Migration, Climate Refugees, Marshall Islands

In many social science disciplines, skewed structural relations have dictated the academic valuation of art producers higher than/over art thinkers. Many academics still regard artistic practice, though capable of serving as a "vehicle for for research or thinking" that creates impactful impressions of social experience/dysfunction, as an illegitimate method of knowledge production (Loveless 2019, 12). However, more recently, in the Canadian context, research-creation as a methodology for qualitative research has been popularized by provincial and federal funding agencies (Truman 2021, xvi), which recognize its potential to support knowledge production and innovation "through artistic expression, scholarly investigation, and experimentation" (Loveless 2019, 6; Truman 2021, xvi).

The exceptional potential of research creation lies in its demand for an interdisciplinary approach that extends beyond the domain of any one discipline, aiming to reconfigure traditional academic and pedagogical training (Loveless, 20291, 7). Since my curiosities and passions overlap at the intersection of environmental studies, creative writing, and anthropology, I adopt the neologism of polydisciplinamory to describe my approach to interdisciplinary research in composing this essay. Polydisciplinamory, a concept coined by Natalie Loveless (2019), is a disruptive practice of establishing connections through content and form (Loveless 2019, 63), utilizing curiosity and love as guides for the scholar to choose positionality

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and disciplines to transgress, and thus challenge practice/theory divides (Loveless 2019, 70). Loveless states that research-creation practiced through a polydisciplinamorous approach "follows desire and builds spaces and contexts that allow the time and space to experiment in unpredictable directions" (Loveless 2019, 70).

At this unique juncture, the urgency of taking Climate action requires us to employ alternative art-based methods of engaging broader non-academic audiences. As such, in the conception of the following experimental essay, I use polydisciplinamorous research-creation as the cornerstone of my research methods. Along the way, I use a variety of submethods, such as Melanie L. Harris's (2017) eco-womanist method of Mining Ecomemory – critical reflection on personal and ancestral experiences (Harris 2017, 49) - employing personal anecdotes as feminist storytelling forms that transform "inherited modes of scholarly vocality" (Loveless 2019, 65), and experimental narrative. I have thus devised a route of discovery for the readers' imagination that takes them on a tumultuous journey through time and space, over the cultural contours that ethnography lays out, first to the past, to a pleasant childhood memory in the Middle East, and then to the opposite side of the globe, to an archipelago in the middle of the Pacific Ocean with a plausibly disheartening future. As distant as the destinations may be, as foreign as some characters may seem, and however believable the plotline, my advice to you, fellow traveller, is to make sure to roll down your windows at every stop and relish the scent of the fresh air you are about to encounter.

Dislocation 1 - Mint Tea and Road Dust

When I travelled to Damascus, Syria as a child, I was fascinated by the historical monuments and delectable food. I made a friend one day while playing in a park, and as a six-year-old, it was fascinating that this friendly little girl of different ethnicity looked just like my friends back in Iran. Now 29 years later, 3.6 million Syrians have been compelled to leave their homes and flee their country due to the violent civil war (Alkan 2021, 180). That little girl and I walked the same streets, breathed the same air, and enjoyed the same traditional mint tea, yet it breaks my heart that we live in very different realities today. Now, while I live in a wealthy country, irritated about my drive-through latté not being hot enough, she is probably stuck in a refugee camp in Turkey with thousands of other Syrians, with no access to clean water or struggling to get by living in a derelict structure somewhere in Lebanon.

As I read more articles on the exodus, I learned that Syrian migrants were gradually moved from Turkish camps into cities, promoted by a state discourse of hospitality and generosity (Alkan 2021, 181). This humanitarian governance was especially effective because it influenced the "dense fabric of relationships" that evolved between Syrians and the locals (Alkan 2021, 181). However, there is a dark side to hospitality. Jacques Derrida (2005; qt. in Alkan 2021, 181) identifies an inherent paradox in the latter, where the act of welcoming creates power imbalances between the host and the guest, creating a capacity for hostility as well. The word "guest" also implies an eventual departure, which is not possible for such forced migrants; this hospitality may not produce equal

citizens and rather deepens the prevalent power inequalities (Alkan 2021, 181-184). This displacement into a new shelter may have been only temporary, and they may never settle into a new home again. Sadly, many people lose their homes and are forced to migrate every year due to war, but not all forced migration happens due to civil unrest. Syria's exodus is the biggest migration crisis we have seen in our generation, but what about the next generation? A yet more devious and stealthy force is taking charge, slowly driving people out of their homeland and into the unknown: sea levels rising. More land will continue to be submerged underwater as the glaciers melt due to climate change, and some of the most vulnerable are the inhabitants of the low-lying Pacific Islands, such as the people of the Marshall Islands (Davenport, Coral, and Haner 2015). Unfortunately, in The West, we rarely hear about them, perhaps since these islands are so secluded, and changes in the sea level are incremental and inconspicuous in the short term.

Dislocation 2.1 - Bikini Bombs and Mirrors of Horror

A nation in the middle of the Pacific Ocean - far North East of Australia, the Republic of Marshall Islands consists of 24 coral atolls totalling 1,156 individual islands and islets sitting just a few feet above sea level (World Atlas 2016). The nation has a population of 50,000 people, and Majuro - the Islands' capital city - has one of the highest population densities in the Pacific (World Atlas 2016). From 1946 to 1958, in a few of those islands, the United States performed nuclear and hydrogen bomb testing, the effects of which still haunt the population (Hodge 2018; Nuti 2007, 42). A group of anthropologists played an integral role in collecting the narratives of what happened in Bikini, Enewetak, Rongelap and Utrik (Nuti 2007, 42). Because of their efforts, the voices of the Marshallese were amplified, and their lived history of this experience was documented in great detail (Nuti 2007, 42). As such, there are accounts of impacted communities witnessing skin peeling off their animals, countless anecdotes of women giving birth to "stillborn creatures resembling jellyfish, intestines and grapes", and many victims developing radiation-induced blood disorders (Nuti 2007, 42; Hodge 2018).

As if that history did not bring about enough torment, the Marshallese have faced a new horror in the recent decade. The sea-level rise resulting from Climate Change-induced melting of the glaciers has caused the island inhabitants to be hit by high-tide floods, destroying homes, roads and water sources, and agriculture (Davenport, Coral, and Haner 2015). As the climate continues warming in the Pacific, it is estimated that by the year 2050, these Islanders will be left with no land and no country to call their own (Davenport, Coral, and Haner 2015).

As a dim glimmer of restorative justice for the immense damage from the nuclear testing, the Marshallese and the people of the Federated States of Micronesia and Palau are allowed unrestricted access to the United States to work, study, and reside as habitual residents. The loss of these lands to rising sea levels in the upcoming years creates about 200,000+ climate change-forced migrants (World Atlas 2016; Davenport, Coral, and Haner 2015; Duke 2017, 424). In return, the US military holds exclusive

control over the wide span of the ocean that engulfs the archipelago, in which Anthropologist Michael Duke sees vestiges of previous colonial practices, compelling him to label it "neocolonialism", considering the nation's sovereignty and dependency on the US military (Duke 2017, 424). Colonialism has a track record of wiping out entire national identities, but what happens when rising sea levels wipe out entire islands? One cannot help but question what will happen to national identities when a country no longer physically exists. (Kirsch 2020, 828).

The relationship between the Marshallese and their identity is complex. From one perspective, the US military control and the unconsented longitudinal "surveillance" of Marshallese bodies as test subjects for nuclear exposure - what Duke calls "a reproduction of the US' securityscape' " - has resulted in the transformation of their nature, both in the context of biology and cultural imaginary (424-425). Amplifying this perplexity, he affirms that the nuclear legacy and the ongoing ramifications of this trauma have implicated their "collective sense of personhood" (Duke 2017, 425).

Part of this collective sense of personhood is the Marshallese's connection to their land in relation to their identity. According to Barbara Johnston's research (qtd. In Nuti 2007, 42), they hold a spiritual connection to the land as their tenet and assume moral responsibility for stewardship of the natural environment (Nuti 2007, 42). This worldview is eloquently illustrated in the words of the late Tony de Brum, one of the key spokespersons of climate change activism in the Marshall Islands, when he declared, "the English language doesn't have [the right vocabulary] and doesn't fully convey the true meaning of the land as our...identity. It is [who we are] as individuals [and] as [a] people, and we will never let it go" (Kirsch 2020, 830). Many Pacific Islanders share this sentiment, rejecting the imagery of disappearing islands and an impending uprooting that would render them climate refugees since they believe in a "cosmopolitan vision" (Kirsch 2020, 828-829). The late Tongan anthropologist Epeli Hau'ofa defined the "cosmopolitan vision" as encouraging viewing Oceania Oceania in a more comprehensive way, as a community that expands beyond borders dictated by imperial legacies, and instead, one that allows people and cultures to move, intermingle, trade, marry, and thus expand networks of economic and social wealth, similar to the practices in the pre-colonial past, rather than a group of "islands in a far sea" (Kirsch 2020, 828). The following is the real-life story of a Marshallese poet-activist who, although they may not ascribe to this way of thinking, may become a climate migrant if fossil fuel consumption stays at the current rate.

Dislocation 2.2 - Trochees on Tides

Her name is Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner. She is a Marshallese mother, poet, and climate activist. She has recited her bone-chilling poetry about the devastating effects of Climate Change on the Marshallese lives at numerous Climate Summits to raise awareness about the dire necessity of divesting from fossil fuels (Goodman 2015). At COP 21 in Paris, she read her poem, Tell Them, about a pair of earrings she sends to a friend in the US. In this poem, she asks her friend to wear the earrings everywhere, and when asked where she acquired them, she is to tell them about the Marshall Islands and

show them on the map where they are; Kathy tells her friend to tell them about the Marshallese way of life and history, and how the rising sea level has affected their livelihood and future (Goodman 2015).

It was so heart-wrenching to read in her blog that three weeks after she came back from the Climate Summit, her city was flooded by high tides, although it was not high-tide season yet, damaging many homes and roads (Jetnil-Kijiner 02 Nov 2014). In that blog post, she tells the story of her cousin, whose home of 20 years, along with the homes of 600 other residents, were destroyed by the high tides of 2014 (Jetnil-Kijiner 02 Nov 2014). She explains that since then, her cousin's family has had no other way but to move from rental to rental and has desperately looked for loans to build a new house on her small teacher's salary (Jetnil-Kijiner 02 Nov 2014). She expresses that her cousin was becoming so hopeless with this predicament that she sometimes did not even see the point in building a new house anymore as she was unsure how long it would keep them dry and warm (Jetnil-Kijiner 02 Nov 2014).

In another blog post I found, Kathy writes a poem to her toddler daughter, Matafele Peinem, called A Letter to My Daughter (Jetnil-Kijiner 24 Sep 2014). In this touching poem, she tells her daughter that despite hearing the islanders say the ocean will take their home away and her children will be rootless, none of that is true (Jetnil-Kijiner 24 Sep 2014; Kirsch 828). She tells her daughter to be assured that she will do everything possible to fight to divest from fossil fuels (Jetnil-Kijiner 24 Sep 2014). Flipping through hundreds of pages in her blog, looking for more of her potent poetry, my eyes started getting heavy, my head slowly dropped, and I momentarily dozed off.

Dislocation 3 - A Luggage Full of Dreams

After being stuck in hellish rush-hour traffic on a hot April morning, I finally arrived at the Buffalo International Airport. I parked my car and headed to the international arrival hall. I was thirsty, so I thought to stop and get two bottles of water for Matafele and me from a convenience store, but then I remembered the freshwater shortage and the soaring prices of bottled water, and I changed my mind. When I got to the arrival hall, I held my sign up so she could locate me in the crowd. I waited anxiously for about 20 minutes until I saw a woman in her mid-30s whom I recognized from our video chats. I approached the gate so she would see my sign with "Matafele" written on it and recognize me. After a few seconds, she finally saw the sign and rushed toward me. We greeted and hugged, and I asked her about the flight. She was exhausted as the flight and the layover totalled about 30 hours. We walked to my car, and I helped her put her luggage in the trunk. After arriving at my house, I let her nap to re-energize.

While I was preparing the afternoon tea, she walked into the kitchen. As we sat at the kitchen table, I thought it was finally a good time to ask about the conditions in Majuro. She said the sea level had risen so much that even the highest points of the atolls were starting to go underwater. She explained that over the recent decades, the Pacific Ocean has become so polluted that there was more plastic floating in it than fish to catch. Since one of the main economies in the Islands was fishing, people suffered tremendously. Similarly, during the past 15 years, groundwater became salinized due to

rising sea levels and destroyed agricultural lands. Hence, the Islands' economy plummeted, and people's livelihoods severely diminished over the last two decades.

I asked about her life and family and her plan for them. She told me her childhood home, where she used to live with her mother, Kathy, had flooded a few years ago, and she had to leave it behind. She explained that her husband and children were staying in a temporary rental in Majuro until she could find an apartment in Buffalo for them to settle in. She also aimed to find schools for them in advance, so they could transition smoothly in this difficult migration from the Marshall Islands to the United States.

Then she grew rather morose and expressed that when she set foot on US soil for the first time, she felt resentment towards "these Americans". She felt they were the ones that destroyed a number of the islands for nuclear testing in her grandparents' time. And, of course, she felt that her mother's blood disorder, which eventually led to her passing, was caused by the residual radiation originating from American Nuclear testing in the 1950s. Matafele was heartbroken that Kathy's lifelong efforts of climate activism did not accomplish much in the end. She felt cursed that she was part of the generation forced to bear witness to the demise of their native land and culture. She felt guilty that now she lived among the people who, although they were responsible for almost half of the Greenhouse Gas emissions in her mother's time, refused to change their lifestyle; people who refused to think of the future generations; hence, Climate Change intensified further, and most of the glaciers melted, and the sea levels rose so much to cover most of her native land in a matter of 30 years, right before her eyes. Then, with tears in her eyes, she said that her grandpa would never approve of them moving if he was still alive. As those tears rolled down her cheeks, she explained that Grandpa John always believed that mother nature would help them somehow. If he was alive today, he "would rather have the freedom of staying in his own place...he would stay there and float... in his boat" rather than move away permanently[1].

I could see the worry in her eyes, worry for her children's future in an unknown environment. She wanted to work on learning Standard English (which was quite different from the Pidgin version most islanders spoke) to be able to teach it to her children before they started school in the fall, so other children wouldn't make fun of their accents. She told me she was grateful that she knew me in Buffalo and was able to come here for more abundant job opportunities. Since about 180,000 other immigrants had travelled to the US recently from the Marshall Islands, Palau, and the Federated States of Micronesia, most cities on the American West Coast were saturated with Pacific Islander migrants. Also, unlike a friend of hers who had left Majuro for Springdale, Arkansas, a few months ago, she didn't know anyone in the Marshallese diaspora community[2] there to join her.

Matafele also asked me if I could help her learn the American ways and mannerisms to find a decent job to support her family in these difficult times. With the recent droughts, freshwater shortages, and the sky-rocketing price of fruit and vegetables due to the significant decline of bees in the past two decades, living a decent life in the US was very costly. I promised to help her find employment and everything else they would need to get back on their feet. Then, I took her to a shopping center to buy some essential items for her stay at my house. In the evening, she helped me with cooking, and I started to really enjoy her company over dinner.

That night when I went to bed, I felt a lump in my throat because of seeing Matafele uprooted like this. When I was in university three decades ago, I had heard of her mother, Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner's poetry and activism. Alongside her, many went on climate marches and rallies, yet why wasn't anything significant achieved in the end? I tried to vote for the politicians who cared about the planet, and I traded my old Ford for a newer electric Tesla. But I could have done more. I should have done more...something way more radical, like gathering all my classmates and chaining ourselves to trees at risk of being razed in the Amazon, to gain the attention of all those who are apathetic to the climate crisis for their own financial gains. But would civil acts of disobedience like that have resulted in structural changes?

Dislocation 4 - Back to the Hot Seat

I wake up panting, perplexed at why I am at my desk, as my mind is still troubled with all the overwhelming anxieties from the dream. Remembering little Matafele's face from the pictures on Kathy's blog, I am sickened by the terrible dream as a possible fate for her. If we don't take the climate crisis seriously now, by the year 2100, those of us who live on islands or in most coastal cities (IPCC 2019) will be losing "the only home we've ever known" (Sagan 1997, 13). As Carl Sagan famously said, "our planet is a lonely speck in the great enveloping cosmic dark. In our obscurity, in all this vastness, there is no hint that help will come from elsewhere to save us from ourselves" (13). Maybe civil acts of disobedience could raise awareness and mobilize the masses, but to create lasting change, the oppressive structures and systems that reinforce social and environmental inequalities have to be dismantled (Amorim-Maia et al., 13).

Climate justice has often been framed and implemented on an international scale, mostly focused on balancing rights and responsibilities (Bulkeley et al. 2014, 31). Other scholars have focused on considerations of environmental justice at the individual level. One scholar, in particular, Paul Harris (2010), argues that rather than addressing environmental justice at the international level, it is more constructive to focus on cosmopolitan justice in which the responsibility for emissions is assigned to 'people' rather than states, to avoid "a misalignment between the political geography of climate change and its environmental geography" (Bulkeley et al. 2014, 32). If we extend Harris's notion of Climate justice to the urban scale, we will recognize that inequalities are produced by the same social, political and economic processes that define 'fairness' (Bulkeley et al. 2014, 33). As such, a re-evaluation of the conceptual framework behind our approach to climate justice is required. Instead of focusing on a simplistic, two-dimensional framework of rights/responsibilities, Bulkeley et al. urge us to widen our gaze and incorporate a third dimension of recognition to the Climate justice imperative. Recognition will provide the lens through which to analyze how urban development processes create forms of social, political and economic inequality and recognize avenues through which they produce vulnerabilities and greenhouse gas emissions (Bulkeley et al. 2014, 33). From this lens, socio-economic injustices are fundamentally interconnected to cultural or symbolic injustices which fail to recognize the needs of certain groups, namely women, the working class, or marginalized racialized commun-

ities (Bulkeley et al. 2014, 33). An extension of this multidimensional approach has been named intersectional climate justice by Amorim-Maia et al. Utilizing the intersectional approach in urban climate adaptation would enable urban leaders to gain an understanding of the compounding and overlapping inherent social, political, and structural inequalities across time and space, with the goal of arriving at holistic, interconnected and multiscale approaches to climate justice (Amorim-Maia et al. 2022, 3-4).

Another constructive step would be to scale down further and refocus on taking action on the individual scale: to take on speaking in different venues, perhaps in our own respective professional capacities, on the insufficient measures implemented by business and political elites to take action towards climate justice and mitigation. As a future urban planner, I aim to be proactive about addressing foundational environmental issues in my locale and avoid providing mere lip service to satisfy suboptimal environmental protection policies.

Notes

[1] This quote is taken from Kirsch (835), who quotes a master mariner and former head of the Environmental Protection Agency in Majuro whom he interviewed.
[2] Brown 2021

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