



# **Pacific Seascapes of the Anthropocene: Changing Human-Nature Relationships in Jeff Murray's *Melt***

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## **Abstract**

*Melt* (2019), Jeff Murray's debut novel is set in the near future of 2048. It depicts how the Anthropocene has wrought massive changes to seascapes, islandscapes, and landscapes, especially those of the tropical Pacific. The novel follows the plight of the people of Independence, a fictional low-lying Pacific island, who, due to rising sea levels and tropical storms, seek to migrate to New Zealand. However, migration is an option for rich countries, and the island community remains climate refugees on their ecologically crumbling island in a new world of mass climate migration. This paper focuses on cultural seascapes and landscapes of the Anthropocene, disruptions in human-nature relationships, and the possibility of human adaptation through climate migration. We read *Melt* with reference to the ecocritical theories of Cheryll Glotfelty, Lawrence Buell, and M. R. Mazumdar.

**Keywords:** Anthropocene, cultural seascapes, climate crisis, climate migration, climate refugee, tropical Pacific, sea level rise, ecocriticism, cli-fi

Vai thought about the ocean rising as they set off on their journey along the coast. She thought about the conceit of people and the idea of the Anthropocene age. Everywhere she looked she could see water taking control and people being humbled before it. Nowhere could she see people in control. People could wreak havoc, and mistook this for power, but the age in front of them was an age of water. The creating, the reshaping was the domain of water. The ice sheets melting, the rivers flooding or drying up and the oceans driving the people like ants. There was no Anthropocene, she concluded: Nature was preparing to strike.

— Jeff Murray, *Melt*

## Introduction: Seascapes

The vast Pacific Ocean and its many islands, forms one of the major tropical regions of the world. Pacific Islander ways of being entwine close relationships between humans, nature, and the afterlife (Chao & Enari, 2021). They furthermore include a strong interconnection with the sea. Epeli Hau'ofa, in *We are the Ocean*, refers to Pacific Islanders as 'ocean peoples' "because our ancestors, who had lived in the Pacific for over two thousand years, viewed their world as 'a sea of islands' rather than 'islands in the sea' (2008, p. 32). This relationship with the sea is expressed in ancient myths and astronomical star charts that were used in ocean navigation, and continues today in contemporary anti-colonial and ecocritical Pacific literature and poetry (cf. Hau'ofa, 2008; Perez, 2020). Pacific cultures invite close relations between nature and culture.

At the other extreme, the Anthropocene is also entangled with seascapes and landscapes. However, in this case, the human/nature binary has left its apocalyptic signature. The Anthropocene refers to the idea that humanity is more than a biological agent, it is also a geological one. The Anthropocene is the current geological epoch in which human activity has irrevocably impacted the Earth's ecosystems, including causing climate change. In the latest report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), human caused global warming of the atmosphere, land, and ocean, has been confirmed with "unequivocal certainty", with climate systems becoming extreme "in direct relation to increasing global warming." Effects include "increases in the frequency and intensity of hot extremes, marine heatwaves, and heavy precipitation" and the increased intensity of tropical storms (IPCC, 2021, B.2; Lundberg et al., 2021). Global sea level rise has also been reported with 'certainty'. Atolls, low-lying islands, mangroves, and deltas are some of the landscapes under most urgent threat from ocean inundation. Further

analysis has shown that sea level rise from warming oceans and melting ice sheets is more pronounced in the Tropics, and particularly in the tropical Pacific (Lundberg et al., 2021; Lundberg, 2021).<sup>1</sup>

Climate crisis and sea level rise will also create ensuing landscapes and seascapes of mass migration from across the Pacific and elsewhere. As Dipesh Chakrabarty warns, this crisis will be routed through our “anthropological differences” (2012, p.14). Some cultures will suffer more than others, and climate refugees will be subject to radically changing nature-culture, human-nature, and human-human relationships. Pacific Islander identity, which is connected to ancestral place (Kana’iaupuni & Malone, 2016), will be ruptured. The relationships between the people and their local ecologies are threatened by environmental injustices, including the loss of land, traditional food sources, and cultural resources. At the core of these threats are ongoing legacies of imperialism, capitalism, and white supremacy (Spencer et al., 2020) that have marginalized the islanders and augmented their suffering from the colonial era to the epoch of the Anthropocene amid rampant global climate breakdown.

*Melt*, a futuristic novel by Jeff Murray (2019), is a narrative of the existential crisis of the inhabitants of Independence, a fictional low-lying island of the Pacific Ocean. As their homeland is inundated by rising seas and tropical storms, the islanders are forced to become climate refugees on their drowning land. Climate migration has become a fraught arena of negotiation and one that benefits the rich over the poor. In 2048, as the great South Pole ice sheets disappear, there is a movement to exploit and settle the planet’s melting continent, Antarctica. New Zealand becomes the gateway to the new land. The novel critically observes the human-nature relations of the climate crisis and the human-human relations refugees are exposed to as they navigate the unequal neo-colonial passageways of migration.

This ecocritical paper focuses on the changing cultural seascapes and cultural landscapes of the Anthropocene through a narrative reading of *Melt*. This reading is interspersed with contemporary climate change reports from a variety of sources. The paper draws on ecocritical theories from Cheryll Glotfelty, Lawrence Buell, and M. R. Mazumdar.

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<sup>1</sup> Lundberg explains: “The complexities of oceanic systems indicate that sea level rise will not occur evenly around the globe. The gravitational-attraction impact exerted by melting ice sheets means higher level sea rise occurs in areas located further from ice sheets. Melting of the Greenland and Antarctic ice sheets will more strongly impact sea level rise in the Tropics, especially the equatorial Pacific region” (2021, pp. 91-92).

## Landscapes of Ecocriticism

Ecocriticism is essentially an “earth-centered approach to literary studies” (Glotfelty, 1996, p. xviii). As a theory, it pays attention to what Cheryll Glotfelty identified as “the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (1996, p. xviii). It also includes the discourses of ecological disasters and environmental degradation arising from the rift between the human and non-human world in the epoch of the Anthropocene. In *The End of Nature: Humanity, Climate Change and the Natural World*, Bill McKibben (1989) remarks, “Nothing happens quickly. Change takes unimaginable – ‘geologic’-time” (p. 4). Hence the ecological crises that are perceived in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries are essentially the consequences of human activities like industrialisation, technological developments, rapidly increasing human population, short-term patterns of decision making, the emergence and development of the capitalist world economy, utilitarian attitudes towards the environment, increases in resource and energy consumption, and deforestation over the long term. Deforestation, plantation landscapes, and extractivist industries are also part of a longer colonial history.

Anthropogenic climate change is considered the most serious global crisis in the contemporary era as it is not limited to any particular space and threatens the existence of every being and the planet itself (Fleming, 2014). Yet, we also know that global climate change will not happen evenly around the world. Dipesh Chakrabarty acknowledges “the uneven impacts of climate change” (2012, p.14) and critiques the notion of the Anthropocene in its rendering “of humans as constitutively one — a species, a collectivity whose commitment to fossil-fuel based, energy-consuming civilization is now a threat to that civilization itself”. And he goes on to emphasize “the contingency of individual human experience; belonging at once to differently-scaled histories of the planet, of life and species, and of human societies” (2012, p. 2, 14; Hartnett, 2021, p. 140). Rachel Hartnett in her recent article ‘Climate Imperialism: Ecocriticism, Postcolonialism, and Global Climate Change’ (2021), agrees that climate change will not be distributed evenly and argues that ecocriticism and its studies of climate change needs to come into relation with postcolonialism “because its impacts will be distributed not just unequally, but in a direct echoing of colonial pathways” (2021, p. 140). Hartnett argues,

Global climate change reinforces disparate economic, social, and racial conditions that developed, fostered, and thrived throughout the long history of colonization, inscribing climate change as a new, slow form of imperialism that is retracing the pathways that colonialism and globalism have already formed. (p. 139)

The tropical regions of the world experienced the greatest impact of colonialism and the changes it wrought on cultural landscapes; in turn, the tropical peoples and regions of the world will be impacted more seriously by anthropogenic climate change.

Increasing awareness regarding the inevitable threat of climate change led to the creation of the IPCC in 1988 under the auspices of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the World Meteorological Organisation (WMO). The IPCC evaluates the latest scientific understanding of climate change, its probable consequences, economic implications, mitigation plans, and the possibility of human adaptation. Such human efforts to confront and halt climate change are also advocated by ecocritical theorist, M. R. Mazumdar who states,

Environmentalism is about the story of a loss but mere expression of anxieties about this loss is not enough: we need some sort of activity, both physical and intellectual, to repair it. To bridge the nature-culture, man-environment gap/divide we need a new kind of thought, the “global reparative thinking”, which is an interconnected, interdisciplinary way of thinking and feeling. (2013, p. 33)

As Mazumdar clarifies, thus bringing us closer to this paper’s concern with the Anthropocene:

Ecocritical reading of nature-nurture (culture), human-nonhuman relationship is intended to expose as well as resist the anthropocentric politics, economics, imperialism, gender bias, and other sorts of exploitation that account for the present environmental hazards and crises such as global warming, climate changes, melting of ice-layers in the polar region, etc. (2013, p. 4)

In addition to scientific and organizational attempts to understand and elucidate the threat of anthropogenic climate change, art and literature undertake the same strategies while also spreading awareness of the increasing breach between humans and nature. In *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination*, Lawrence Buell (2009) argues, “Like racism, environmental crisis is broadly a cultural issue, not the property of a single discipline” (p. vi). Amitav Ghosh, in *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2018), maintains a similar idea that climate change is a crisis of culture and imagination.

However, when climate disasters seem unavoidable, adaptation remains the only option for survival in an ecologically catastrophic world (Smithers & Smit, 1997), often through migration. Public thinkers, journalists, social scientists, and contemporary writers, including novelists, deal with climate calamity and subsequent climate displacement and migration in numerous ways. Novels like Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* (2019) and Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* (2010), which are set in the present, depict massive water pollution, climate change, climate migration, and refugee crises in the mangrove region of the Sundarbans in India, and the Niger delta in Africa. Another category of fiction depicts climate-driven human displacement and migration implicitly, such as N.K. Jemisin's *The Fifth Season* (2015) and Jesse Ball's *The Divers' Game* (2019). Young adult's cli-fi novels like Marcus Sedgwick's *Floodland* (2000) and Julie Bertagna's *Exodus* (2002), envision a post-apocalyptic future where people flee to foreign countries because of runaway climatological alterations in their homelands. These novels, despite different categories and stories of climate migration, explicate the predicament of climate refugees. They envisage dystopian societies devastated by the effects of climate change and characters affected by hard "biopolitical realities" (De Bruyn, 2020, p. 3).

*Melt* (2019), a futuristic cli-fi novel by Jeff Murray, is one such narrative. It depicts the existential crisis of people of a fictional low-lying island of the Pacific Ocean owing to rapid sea-level rise. This 'fictional-reality', which portrays an imaginative future but is based on contemporary events in actual places, also explores climate-afflicted refugee crises and the possibility of adaptation to the changing natural and geopolitical climate of the world. In the text, the human-nature relation changes from humans in relation with nature to nature as a destructive force that mercilessly victimises all living beings in the forms of extreme weather events, violent storms, and rising seas.

## Cultural Landscapes of the Anthropocene and Sea Level Rise

In *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture, and Environment*, Lawrence Buell (2001) notes, "...the nature-culture distinction is both a distorting and a necessary lens through which to view both the modernization process and the postmodernist claim that we inhabit a prosthetic environment, our perception of which is more simulacra-mediated than context-responsive" (p. 5). During the Anthropocene, the physical environment of the world is reshaped by neoliberal pursuits, technology, and geopolitics, with nature either exploited or reproduced in the forms of luxurious objects like lawns, gardens, theme parks, and habitat zoos – to name but a few. This exploitation and luxury consumption also leads to environmental degradation and climatic changes (Buell, 2001).



Anthropogenic climate change, a global crisis of the contemporary epoch, basically arises from the ceaseless exploitation of natural resources, conspicuously in the colonial era beginning with the sixteenth century, and rapaciously after the Industrial Revolution in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. As Dipesh Chakrabarty (2012) states,

Humans today are not only the dominant species on the planet, they also collectively constitute – thanks to their numbers and their consumption of cheap fossil-fuel-based energy to sustain their civilizations – a geological force that determines the climate of the planet much to the detriment of civilization itself. Today, it is precisely the ‘survival of the species’ on a ‘world-wide scale’ that is largely in question. (p. 15)

Hence harmful changes in climate and the environment stem from, borrowing Abbie Ventura’s (2011) words, “global capitalism’s destruction of nature, humanity, and history” (p. 90). Human-driven global temperature rise brings about drought, melting of ice sheets and glaciers, sea-level rise, flood, extreme weather events, food insecurity, lack of clean water, deterioration of health, and disease outbreaks. Such ecological crises are captured in contemporary climate change novels which, as Sophia David (2016) states, communicate “climate change, engaging readers with the issue, and making climate change meaningful and relevant to non-scientific people” (p. 27).

*Melt*, is set in the near future of October 2048, as the island of Independence suffers from eight days of continuous storms which compound the effects of the already intruding sea through storm wave surges. Many of the Islanders are left homeless and destitute, including the family of the 28-year-old protagonist Vai Shuster. This fictional incident corresponds with Patrick Nunn and Nobuo Mimura’s (1997) observation that: “Among all future dangers which threaten our planet, that involving sea-level rise driven by anthropogenically-induced temperature rise, is that most feared by Pacific island peoples” (p. 134). In *Melt*, the possessions of the islanders are swept away by the ocean as it washes almost everything off the island. The narrative informs the reader:

The ocean rarely rested, storm followed storm. Black skies dragged angry winds across the wild ocean. The island’s reef broke up, bleached out. Surf surged through, sweeping away buildings. All the hoists and fish storage were gone from the little wharf that China had funded. The news that came to the island’s people gnawed at their

stocks of resolve. Myriad threats were combining into a pandemic across the globe. (Murray, 2019, p. 7)

*Melt* portrays the future culmination of present-day climate-driven crises faced by Pacific Island countries. These contemporary climate catastrophes are persistently reported in the world news. For instance: “several Pacific Island countries were hit by three cyclones between the middle of 2020 and January 2021” (Singh Khadka, 2021, para. 11). This particular report came just a few months before the UN climate change conference (COP26) in November 2021, at which representatives of the Pacific Island countries, including highly connected Pacific youth, called for the urgent need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in order to limit global warming and its cascading effects, especially sea level rise (Rabukawaqa-Nacewa, 2022).

In *Melt*, Vai’s house, one of the largest and strongest on the island is shattered and swept away. This devastation is not merely a random event. As Delphine Bossy (2019) argues,

Pacific countries are among the most exposed to climate change. Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands and Tonga are also among the world’s most disaster-prone nations. In the Solomon Islands, at least five reef islands have been lost completely to sea-level rise and coastal erosion while another six islands have been severely eroded. (para. 8)

Moreover, satellite data show that, during the 2019 summer in the northern hemisphere, Greenland lost 600 gigatonnes of ice causing a global sea-level rise of 2.2 millimeters in only two months (Velicogna et al., 2020). *Melt* is based on such scientific data that demonstrates proof of global heating and sea level rise. Apart from irreparable material damages, these climate disasters invariably cause human tragedy and radical change to the Pacific way of life. Vai’s father Moses, a fisherman, is lost at sea when he tries to save their last good fishing boat. He is presumed dead. The novel hints at a future in which Pacific nature-culture harmony has turned into a ceaseless conflict in which humankind is defenceless against violent natural forces. On the island of Independence, broken land and destroyed vegetation remain the only possessions of Vai’s family after the storms and the seas subside. The narrative informs the reader,

Vai glanced at her mother and shuddered in memory of the fight they’d had that morning. The older woman had made a point of taking them all to the coast to survey the wreckage of their home, their shop and



the coolhouse that stored their fish and the catches of their neighbours  
– all gone. (Murray, 2019, p. 15)

The climate change-afflicted islanders suffer the loss of their homes and experience food shortages. Inundated by seawater, they lack fresh water, which in turn carries the threat of disease.<sup>2</sup> As Wolfgang Sachs (2008) notes, the urgent need for cuts in fossil fuel use, and reduction in greenhouse gases, are imperative not only to protect the environment, but also to protect human rights. Writing of Tulun and Takuu, neighbouring atolls in the Pacific Ocean, he argues that Islanders are “in the process of losing this core of civil rights: food, shelter, and an infection-free environment” (p. 336).

Vai’s family becomes homeless along with most of the islanders. With her husband gone, Vai’s mother urges her daughter to become the advocate for Independence in order to secure their migration to New Zealand. It is her duty to the islanders, but it will turn out to be a harrowing task.

A Chinese supply ship arrives in Independence to provide emergency aid. On board is Dr Zhu who examines Emma, Vai’s younger sister, as she has been coughing blood. He diagnoses TB, and explains: “There’s a new strain of TB in these islands. Nothing’s working on it. Nothing yet. If you have TB you need to make sure you don’t cough on anyone” (Murray, 2019, p. 13). The suffering of the islanders is aggravated by the outbreak of such diseases for which there is no effective remedy. Vai informs Dr Zhu about their intended migration to New Zealand. They discuss how Pacific migration is part of the identity of the islanders and shows links across time and space. There was the great Austronesian migration of those ancient seafaring people who are part of the cultural landscape of the tropical worlds of the Pacific and Indian Oceans, stretching from Taiwan in the north, New Zealand in the south, Madagascar in the west, and Hawai’i in the east. Thus, ancestrally the Indigenous people of Taiwan and the Māori of New Zealand are related and form part of a vast cultural seascape. Dr Zhu also speaks of another great migration of Chinese people to New Zealand. He says, “It took months for the Chinese goldminers to get to New Zealand in the 1860s, and now the Chinese middle class get there in a few hours” (Murray, 2019, p. 14). He informs Vai, that there is no place for refugees to take shelter in China since the Chinese also suffer from food shortages and famine under climate change, a legacy of the country’s own rapid industrialisation

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<sup>2</sup> Jean Anderson (2020) notes of the issue of water and the Pacific that while climate change addresses sea level rise, the ownership of water (which is increasingly bottled) and access to clean water is set to become an increasingly fraught issue. She also notes in her analysis of the film *Vai*, which brings together several segments on the topic of water by Māori and Pacifica female directors, that ‘Vai’ is not only a name for a woman, but is also the word for water (*wai/vai*).

(Maizland, 2021). Despite China, India, and the USA being some of the richest and most powerful countries in the near future Anthropocene, each faces staggering environmental degradation wrought by the climate change that their massive industrialisation so strongly contributed to. These great continental countries thus seek a new territory to settle. They are looking towards the southern Pacific, to the melting landscapes of Antarctica, with a gateway through New Zealand.

Although the twenty thousand inhabitants of Independence can no longer sustain themselves on their island due to the devastating and persistent effects of climate change, they are not allowed to migrate to New Zealand, the long-promised land of Pacifika peoples. A representative of the New Zealand government visits Independence to explain that the Adjustment Office has decided to leave the people of Independence on the island for one more decade. She advises Vai to secure an option for Independence when she goes to New Zealand as an advocate, but clarifies that the people of Independence are not climate refugees, but rather, “survival migrants” (Murray, 2019, p. 16), adding that there are many countries that are on the waiting list to seek refuge in New Zealand and the enormity of the problems Independence faces do not make it a special case.

Vai informs her cousin Leon, who already lives in New Zealand, about the group called Young Nature. They came to Independence and showed the Islanders horrific visions of the world outside. Films of people from countries no longer habitable, of refugee camps, people behind barbed wire, and those living in tents. The films are menacing, for they are an indication that the islanders have to go on living a hazardous life, under threat of rising seas and reliant on aid, as they wait out the mandatory decade before they can migrate to a potentially safer life. The refugees in the films are mostly sad and frightened, which also leads them to fight amongst themselves. Despondent Vai remarks:

Climate breakdown hasn't even kicked in yet. From here on things really turn to shit and decisions are going to be made about leaving millions upon millions of people to die. It's not like a world war where the political leaders can turn it off when they get sick of it. Two hundred years! There's two hundred years of calamity baked in place and there's no hero to just turn that off. (Murray, 2019, p. 54)

## **Landscapes of Climate Migration and Refugee Crises**

During anthropogenic climate crises, people are compelled to leave their lands and move elsewhere in search of a new home. In *Migration and Climate Change*, Oli Brown (2008)

argues that “environmental degradation, and in particular climate change, is poised to become a major driver of population displacement – a crisis in the making” (p. 11). In a time of climate upheaval, people in relatively safer places become more xenophobic, insensitive, and inconsiderate towards refugees or migrants because they do not want their land to be overcrowded (Munoz, 2021). Katha Kartiki maintains, “...as climate change affects the availability of resources and reshapes geographical boundaries, communities will be forced to migrate to access natural resources, and seek more productive livelihoods. This will likely drive conflict, as people struggle over limited resources and cross national borders” (2011, pp. 23-24). In *Melt*, such conflicts are pervasive and there are destitute refugees throughout the world trying to migrate to a habitable place. Many of the countries of Europe are navigating to the Arctic, while countries of Asia and the Pacific, of China and India, and of the Americas are looking towards the southern continent. In the novel, the New Zealand Prime Ministerial advisor Adam Walker declares, “So many refugees, a hundred million surging around the world. So many small wars” (Murray, 2019, p. 127).

The idea of place has always been of key concern to ecocritical studies. Partly to redress the historic neglect of setting relative to plot, character, image, and symbol in literary works, as well as to address environmental concerns. Moreover, ecocriticism’s attention to place reflects its recognition of the interconnectedness between human life/history and physical environments to which works of imagination bear witness (Glottfelty, 1996). The search for a place to call home is a dominant motif in *Melt*. Vai reaches New Zealand as an advocate for securing a liveable place for the islanders of Independence. She finds this new country to be the antithesis of present-day Independence. Society is characterised by diversity – people of “all ethnicities and ages and dressed in an odd assortment of clothes, having to manage warm weather and then wet from the southerlies” (Murray, 2019, p. 36). She sees people smiling, laughing, eating, and drinking.

Vai learns from Leon and his fellow international workers that refugees have already overcrowded New Zealand: “There’s already millions of them here ... The government won’t say, won’t publish the numbers. But you can see them all the way south to Hamilton and over to Tauranga. Migrants, refugees, and migrants. That’s not us, not community” (Murray, 2019, p. 69). The local people of New Zealand call those migrants and refugees “lice” (Murray, 2019, p. 69). The text thus calls the reader’s attention to the uncertain future of the landless “when migrants are made scapegoats for social ills” (Crush & Ramachandran, 2009, p. 44). Leon is part of a group that had formed to alleviate the migrant crisis in New Zealand.

Leon's group is involved in climate migration, moving people around the world, at the same time ensuring that New Zealand does not become overwhelmed. A geologist, Dr Tu Weiping informs Vai that some of their friends are on the borders between China and Kashmir as they guide refugees who try to move to India. Tu and the ecologists, Dr Xie Chunhua and Dr Zhang Yan, have guided refugees before and Tu tells the stories of their adventures and encounters with bandits who exploit refugees while crossing borders. One man in the group is bleeding, it is he who announces that "India, China, America. They've got a plan and we have to do our part. Whatever it is, we have to do it" (Murray, 2019, p. 69). Vai is frightened and unnerved by their determination to prevent a refugee crisis in New Zealand since she also has the same plan to secure refuge in New Zealand for the islanders. But Leon assures her: "No, you're Pasifika and you belong here. Anyway, I don't care about it. I just do it for money. The other guys are into it. They're trying to stop the country getting overrun. There's already a million and a half migrants and refugees here" (Murray, 2019, p. 70).

Vai meets the Maori woman, Miriama Hunter, an influential property developer, and this brings a ray of hope. Miriama, has connections and first-hand experience in climate refugee and migrant issues, a skills set now necessary in the new landscape of real estate and city development. She updates Vai on how Dr Zhu has trained a group of Europeans who got stuck in Greece to function like professional aid workers. She explains:

Zhu knew that all over the world there was a need for people to work in detention camps and the tougher refugee camps. Usually the work was done by locals but they didn't always do it well. The locals were antagonistic to the refugees. He trained these people to fly in, fly out, do the work well without any antagonism. They had no stake in it. (Murray, 2019, p. 74)

Miriama also shares her experience of visiting Bangladesh before they moved five thousand Bangladeshi migrants to the new government funded estate she built in Dunedin. The lowland tropical delta region of Bangladesh has been engulfed by the sea. Agriculture is ruined. The hills adjoining the river valley are already inhabited, so the river delta community moved to the steeper forested areas, causing deforestation. Miriama remembers: "They had subsisted on handouts and aid for over a decade. They lived in tents and the near-constant rain and wind meant landslides were an ever-present risk" (Murray, 2019, p. 74). Community representatives asked her why she was taking only a few thousand refugees when all the people of the hills could be accommodated in New

Zealand. However, the aim was not to rescue everyone, Miriama imagines the formation of a utopian global society: “We’re a new type of nation, one hundred million strong, and we’re the future for a world that needs to be global” (Murray, 2019, p. 77).

These sub-stories within *Melt*, elucidate how the landscapes of climate migration are widely viewed as one of the most dramatic consequences of climate change (Gemenne, 2012). Millions will get stranded, millions will reach new lands, and there will be radical changes in cultural landscapes.

### **Human and Ecological Struggles for Existence and Adaptation**

Adaptation to the changing climatic conditions of the earth during the Anthropocene denotes ways of reacting to anthropogenic climate change and making the best of any opportunities presented for survival in an ecologically disordered world. Philip Hulme (2005) argues: “Adaptation strategies should aim to increase the flexibility in management of vulnerable ecosystems, enhance the inherent adaptability of species and ecosystem processes, and reduce trends in environmental and social pressures that increase vulnerability to climate variability” (p. 784). His argument does not reflect the fictional reality of *Melt*. In the novel, powerful countries and people plan to occupy the remaining unflooded lands. While the Russians and Europeans are vying for the Arctic; China, India, and the USA plan to take over Antarctica, the Earth’s southernmost continent. New Zealand will be the gateway to the new land, it will require creating a port city, similar to Hong Kong. But poorer nations remain marginal to this grand vision. Since poor people have fewer resources, and thus lower adaptive capacity (Hallegatte et al., 2018), they are at the forefront to suffer from the global climate disaster.

Independence is one of these poorer nations. The resilient islanders continue to suffer extreme weather events, even as they keep hoping to be permitted to migrate to New Zealand. Vai finally comprehends: “The island had to be finished...so all twenty thousand inhabitants could take up the decade-old promise that they could move to New Zealand” (Murray, 2019, p. 12). Vai learns more about the refugee problems in New Zealand from her cousin Leon:

There were promises that we’d take in all the Islanders, but now everyone’s saying, ‘Oh, we’ve fallen behind in health. Oh, what about catching up on fixing roads, flooding, all that. So the government’s been breaking its promises, not letting people in or making them stay in towns

that are broken. Places Kiwis won't live in. Giving first choice to migrants from rich places. (Murray, 2019, p. 33)

As Islam and Winkel state, "the discussion of the impact of climate change on poverty often extended to the impact of climate change on inequality" (2017, p. 4). It becomes clear to Vai, that being poor means being treated unequally.

Vai laments the loss of the previous heaven-like state of her island: "It was a paradise. I missed that time. But I can remember when it was good" (Murray, 2019, p. 24). The islanders' predicament reflects Sophie Chao and Dion Enari's argument regarding the marginalization of Islander peoples, their voices, and their beliefs systems which present interrelationships of nature and people. These other ways of being and knowing are silenced under dominant western discourses and policies.

The voices obscured by dominant imaginaries include those of non-Western and Indigenous peoples of the tropics and elsewhere, who have always recognised the interdependencies of human and other-than-human beings, yet who bear the brunt of environmental crises in their everyday lives. They also include marginalised voices within marginalised communities – the women, the children, the non-human, and the elemental, present, past, and yet unborn.... (Chao & Enari, 20201, p. 35).

Chao and Enari remind us that the failure to recognize nature-culture intertwinings is at the heart of the climate change predicament and they furthermore insist that we need "to consider what ancestors we will become – and how we will be remembered – by imagined communities of life to come." (2021, p. 35).

In *Melt*, the future generation of the Pacific Islands remains marginalized and ignored. As was the case during colonialism, the islanders find themselves subjected to western ways of dividing the world and categorizing peoples. As noted by Epeli Hau'ofa (2008) in *We are the Ocean*:

...continental men—Europeans and Americans—drew imaginary lines across the sea, making the colonial boundaries that confined ocean peoples to tiny spaces for the first time. These boundaries today define the island states and territories of the Pacific. (p. 32)



These imaginary lines furthermore divide and separate people into manageable categories: those of rich or poor, of worthy or unworthy, of priority or not. In *Melt*, the post-climate change Pacific island becomes a replica of the colonized Pacific Islands since, in the contemporary globalized epoch, neo-colonial influences persist (Bevacqua, 2010).

When Vai expresses her wish of securing a place like Hamilton for the islanders, Leon indicates that she can't get that place. As Hamilton has good weather and is suitable for farming, everyone tries to get into that place. Cheap food is available over there during stormy seasons when crops get destroyed. Rich migrants move to Hamilton. As there are job opportunities available in construction and cultivation, poor labourers and farmers are also found there. But the citizens of Hamilton have various tricks to keep refugees out. Although, as Sara Diamond (1996) maintains regarding earlier times of migration "the focus on cultural homogeneity was central to early anti-immigrant activity" (p. 157), in the time of climate upheaval, anti-immigrant activity is moreover also a socio-political and economic concern.

Thus, being mentally prepared for policy impediments, Vai finally reaches the Adjustment Office "a sorting pen for advocates of nations that were sinking or burning" (Murray, 2019, p. 37). At the Adjustment Office, Mike Powell tells her that Independence is now a Category Three consideration. Vai clearly states the islanders' demand: "The location we settle in next needs to have jobs and access to opportunities so that we are not a burden. We are people who stand on our own feet" (Murray, 2019, p. 38). Vai is asked to choose any one out of three given options, but none of those places are suitable for living.

Vai considers Balclutha to be a better option. But here Miriama disappoints her, as she says that the islanders of Independence will have to wait ten more years before being permitted to enter Balclutha. Miriama updates Vai regarding their present settlement plans: "We've shifted to taking migrants from the countries we need as partners, the big and the powerful. We're telling the failing countries, 'Sorry, no room'.... Except the little Pacific Island countries, we're still promising to take you" (Murray, 2019, p. 59).

Vai keeps trying to understand the situation and to find a way to secure a viable place for the islanders. She attends a workshop at which a speaker advocates the importance of technology, claiming it "was on the cusp of bringing an end to climate change" (Murray, 2019, p.61). The Ministerial Advisor, Adam Walker, criticizes the speaker and the notion of a one-size-fits-all tech solution: "How is there so much achievement, knowledge and wealth while at the same time, and often in the same locations, so much of the population is in poverty, generation after generation?" (Murray, 2019, p. 61). Dr Zhu is also at the

workshop and similarly draws attention to the failure of the carbon-free economy: “People have been telling each other we can rely on pricing pollution and cap and trade since 1992 at least, but nothing effective was done. We were anesthetised by people like him and his half-informed mates” (Murray, 2019, p. 62). Dr Zhu believes that people like the presenter and his colleagues, through their glorification of technology, try to detract attention from the climate crisis which is at a stage of irretrievable environmental degradation and sea level rise. As Robert McLeman (2008), has argued: “the window for reducing greenhouse gas emissions and averting such an undesirable future is rapidly closing” (p. 4). In the near future scenario of *Melt*, that window has closed, and the novel presents the last stage of accepting the inevitable reality and adapting to it. As Dr. Zhu comments: “Arranging ourselves for the crash. Making preparations for the changes and the opportunities” (Murray, 2019, p. 63).

Adam Walker calls climate change a ‘war’ in which the rich and their mid-level support have already discovered that they are capable of adapting to the changing climate. He states:

We’re on the verge of the apocalypse and it’s, well, let’s face it, it’s ordinary. We’re adapting and accommodating and avoiding. This should be the greatest thriller ever written, but it’s not.... Apocalypse. Quite. Soon. Not very energising, not very scary, is it? Imagine that, the Apocalypse as a box-office flop. So long in the making and it turns out to be manageable. We just shuffle around. (Murray, 2019, pp. 65-66)

Rather than an existential crisis, climate change in a Western policy scenario is to be handled, managed, and manipulated. On the contrary, climate change poses an existential threat to the islandscapes of the Pacific and the islanders who are condemned to their ecologically drowning homelands, and thus incapable of adapting. The rich countries can buy the rights to migrate to safer lands to settle and exploit them, leaving their broken environments behind. *Melt* shows that despite economic and technological advancements, powerful countries will be impacted by the environmental forces of climate change; yet rich citizens can escape.

The narrative informs the reader that since Antarctica is not anyone’s property, it is the only hope for a poor island like Vai’s. Negri, the captain of the ‘Taniwha’, an Ocean Warrior Ship, assumes that China, India, and the USA – the big three – must have already planned to occupy Antarctica when its land is freed of ice: “As Antarctica melts, a bid for

control will be made” (Murray, 2019, p. 99). This is 2048, when the moratorium on mining Antarctica is to be renegotiated. Miriama assumes that Beijing will be the Chinese Antarctic capital, and she plans to build a new city in the deep south of New Zealand the size of Hong Kong; an international city gateway to the melting Antarctic continent.

David Herket (2019) notes, “Murray’s characters are forced to change and develop as the world around them shifts. Vai’s experiences take her from an island overwhelmed by storm-waves to the machinations of finance and the expedient self-interest of others” (para. 8). Herket’s analysis is observable in the actions and outlooks of the characters of the novel. Miriama is optimistic and continues to imagine a new utopia in her native land of New Zealand. She says: “This chaotic climate process and migration are as much about integration as they are about disintegration” (Murray, 2019, p. 242). “We’ll be a new world, a better one in the end” (Murray, 2019, p. 73). While Vai is left hoping against hope to secure a place for the islanders to help build the new integrated southern city, to find a place, and secure work. Adam Walker, likewise, changes and adapts to his own needs. He illegally sells habitable land to the Japanese. Vai finds out, and further realises the implication that the poor have no liveable place planned anywhere in New Zealand or Antarctica and are left with no viable options to survive. She too must adapt. Out of utter desperation, she murders Adam and steals the forty million dollars.

## **Conclusion: A Crisis of Viable Landscapes**

Jeff Murray’s *Melt* underlines the crisis of land and viable landscapes as this becomes the key concern of the text, explicating the perpetual human relationship with, and dependence upon nature. In this climate changed world, it is evident that, paraphrasing Cheryll Glotfelty’s (1996) words, ‘nature is not just the stage upon which the human drama is acted, but is itself an actor’ (p. xxi). In the text, the phenomena of global climate breakdown are “communicated in the language of disaster, which seems to provide the most compelling and persuasive means of persuading its audience, not only of the devastation being wreaked upon global ecosystems, but of the human consequences of that devastation” (Hughes & Wheeler, 2013, p. 2). It calls the reader’s attention to contemporary real-world slow catastrophic acts which are, in Rob Nixon’s (2011) words, “low in instant spectacle but high in long-term effects” (p. 10). By portraying a hypothetical apocalyptic future, the text teaches “...ecocentric consciousness, along with the vast extension of those values it entails”, it is a reminder of “the present crisis, and of the long history of creative struggle to overturn an ecosocial order founded on the oppression and exploitation of people and nature” (Newman, 2002, p. 21). Such a literary weapon aims to create an ecocentric attitude and positive environmental behaviours during the

contemporary capitalist era. As Lawrance Buell in *The Environmental Imagination* (1995) has argued, the apocalypse has become “the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal” (p. 285). And this imaginary awakens in the reader an ecological consciousness.

*Melt* throws light on the quandary of people from disadvantaged tropical island nations, and other countries, and elucidates how, in Suzanne Goldenberg’s (2014) words, “...those who did the least to cause climate change would be the first in the line of fire: the poor and the weak, and communities that were subjected to discrimination...” (para. 8). It also depicts an immense psychological strength and resolution of people for survival in an inundated world, exhibiting how utopian visions can be maintained in a dystopian panorama (Baccolini, 2004). Thus, the environmental dystopia imagined in *Melt* is inhabited by optimist characters – some of whom work towards the betterment of society, many of whom exploit society – while all intend to explore future opportunities. As Caren Irr (2017) upholds, “Cli-fi knits...a description of the effects of a dramatic change in the Earth’s climate on a particular location and a vision of the options available to a population seeking to adapt to or mitigate those effects” (para. 1). For the future generation imagined in the novel, adaptation is the only way of keeping up with the global climate breakdown, and courageously, they confront climate change when it appears to be unrelenting. However, the novel also reveals the inequalities that remain linked to colonial pasts and are projected into neo-colonial futures where the peoples most vulnerable to climate disaster are incapable of adapting to climate change due to socio-political, economic, and ecological factors. *Melt* is also a cautionary tale that seeks to reveal the reckless neoliberal pursuits of the Anthropocene that bring about irrevocable and detrimental climatological changes.

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