Elizabeth DeLoughrey

The Sea is Rising: Visualizing Climate Change in the Pacific

Twenty years ago, Epeli Hau’ofa published his influential essay "Our Sea of Islands," arguing that the legacies of colonial belittlement that render the Pacific as "islands in a far sea" need to be replaced with a more accurate and world-enlarging view. Instead, he argued, we must recognize the primacy of the largest ocean on the planet which facilitated both the legacies of Pacific voyaging as well as contemporary circuits of globalization, rendering the region as "a sea of islands" better known as Oceania. While Hau’ofa was concerned with the ecological health of the ocean, he could not have foreseen the ways in which climate change, particularly sea-level rise, has transformed islands that are in fact threatened by the expansion of the sea, faced with a new era of what has increasingly been termed "carbon colonialism." The dramatic changes to the geographies of low-lying atolls in the Pacific have generated an unprecedented body of cultural narratives that are translating the urgency of climate change mitigation to a global audience. My paper will explore the rise in documentaries that are visualizing the challenges faced by island communities such as Tokelau, Tuvalu, Kiribati, and the Marshalls as some adapt and, increasingly, migrate in response to the erosion and salinization of their lands, and will raise questions about a type of imperial nostalgia and "salvage environmentalism" at work in the production of some climate change discourse.

Elizabeth DeLoughrey is Associate Professor in the Department of English and the Institute for the Environment and Sustainability at University of California, Los Angeles. She is the author of Routes and Roots: Navigating Caribbean and Pacific Island Literatures, and co-editor of Caribbean Literature and the Environment, Postcolonial Ecologies: Literature and the Environment, and a forthcoming volume entitled Global Ecologies and the Environmental Humanities: Postcolonial Approaches. She is completing a manuscript about climate change and empire in literature and the visual arts.

Enquires: Rosanne.Kennedy@anu.edu.au