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More Than a Climate Change Protest: Football, Poetry, and the Marshall Islands

A few nights before the annual 2019 Yale-Harvard football game, I was invited via text to "participate in a really exciting action… coming up" by the Yale Endowment Justice Coalition and to attend a 4-hour workshop teaching the basics of nonviolent direct action, or NVDA. As I was told over a furtive phone call, the plan was to run onto the field during halftime with student activists from both Yale University and Harvard University, creating a spectacle that our respective schools' investments offices would not be able to ignore, with the end goal of pressuring our schools to divest from fossil fuels and cancel their holdings in Puerto Rican debt. Despite the assurance that I could "certainly come to the training even if (I) haven't made (my) mind up about participating," I was immediately hesitant. Would this be a slippery slope into the infamous liberal echo chamber that I had been warned about? Would I be indoctrinated into supporting something I did not truly believe in? And even if I did agree with the cause, this would be a protest at one of the most widely televised sporting events in the world—what if it backfired spectacularly? Would this statement be worth the risk? With all these concerns in mind, I decided to attend the NVDA training, if only to learn more about the issue at hand.

As I would find, the goal of the protest was to place pressure on Yale to divest by using the setting of the renowned Yale-Harvard football game to shine a national spotlight on this issue (#NobodyWins). It was performed in the larger context of the divestment movement as a whole, which "started small at schools like Swarthmore around 2011" and "is now a global movement

with commitments from more than a thousand organizations and tens of thousands of individuals controlling some $8.8 trillion in combined assets" (O'Daly). Notably, the University of California system recently announced that it would divest from fossil fuels, justifying this decision as a means to address a "financial risk" rather than a response to student activists, yet nevertheless indicating the growing prominence and feasibility of divestment (Artz). Still, while the history of the divestment movement sounded good on paper, I was deeply unsure. Even if divestment was feasible, was it the responsibility of universities to address the dangers of climate change through such a drastic choice as total divestment from all fossil fuel companies? As I left the NVDA training, I was not convinced that divestment was so necessary and impactful of a solution as to warrant this type of wide-scale action.

Yet later in my dorm, I was struck by the memory of reading *Iep Jaltok*, a poetry collection by Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner exploring the intersections between the colonial history of the Marshall Islands and the current climate crisis faced by the Marshallese as rising sea levels threaten to sink island nations underwater. I was in my cozy dorm in Connecticut, thousands of miles away from the tropical waters of the Marshall Islands—yet as I thought about the collection's themes of the intersections between climate change and history, I realized that they were not so distant after all. In fact, these ideas were entirely applicable to my dilemma! In her collection, Jetnil-Kijiner shocks the reader with brutal depictions of the damage caused by U.S. nuclear testing on the Marshall Islands, describing "jelly babies / tiny beings with no bones / skin—red as tomatoes", the funeral of her niece Bianca and her "rolls and rolls of hair / dead as a doornail black as a tunnel hair thin / as strands of tumbling seaweed"—these appalling images put forth the countless number of ways in which the U.S. government has indirectly slaughtered huge swaths of the Marshallese population (Jetnil-Kijiner, 19-24). And while the end of the

collection focuses most on the looming threat of rising sea levels to the Marshall Islands, Jetnil-Kijiner emphasizes that it is nevertheless necessary to understand the effect of U.S. nuclear testing on the Marshall Islands to fully grasp how climate change, colonialism, and culture are all interconnected, and how refusal to act on climate change is a continuation of historical injustices committed against marginalized people. This framework of intersectionality would clarify many of the reservations that I held about the protest. For instance, I was confused about why cancelling Puerto Rican debt was part of the demand: could this goal potentially detract from an otherwise unified mission in divesting from fossil fuels? Yet as *Iep Jaltok* demonstrates, the spheres of influence that established colonial legacies in the Marshall Islands and Puerto Rico evolved into the same power structures that continue to enable powerful countries to emit unprecedented amounts of carbon emissions at the expense of other nations. During the period of nuclear testing in the Marshall Islands, Jetnil-Kijiner reports that U.S. leaders said "*90,000 people are out there. Who / gives a damn?*" (Jetnil-Kijiner 20). She compares the Marshall Islands, in terms of its global status, to "just crumbs you / dust off the table, wipe / your hands clean of", thus allowing global leaders to ignore the extensive impacts of climate change on the Marshallese (Jetnil-Kijiner 77). Jetnil-Kijiner exposes the notion that insignificance justifies inaction, a mentality that was used to justify historical exploitation of marginalized communities and is currently used to maintain the status quo on issues like climate change and Puerto Rican debt. This relationship between colonialism and the current climate crisis is the same relationship between colonialism and Puerto Rican debt, therefore necessitating similar action on both problems and legitimizing the Yale Endowment Justice Coalition's decision to advocate for both issues simultaneously.

But how could I be certain that divestment would be the correct action to take? According to the Yale Investments Office, "targeting fossil fuel suppliers for divestment, while ignoring the damage caused by consumers, is misdirected," given the ubiquity of fossil fuels in powering everyday life ("Ethical"). Similarly, at a meal I attended in September with Marvin Chun, the Dean of Yale College, his response to a question regarding fossil fuel divestment was to highlight the numerous ways in which Yale University tries to combat climate change through alternative avenues, like research. However, this logic ignores the existence of a wide variety of ways in which people and institutions may combat climate change. Jetnil-Kijiner describes the immeasurable hope derived from "petitions blooming from teenage fingertips… families biking, recycling, reusing… engineers dreaming, designing, building… artists painting, dancing, writing," all of which are means by which consumers are actively trying to fight the climate crisis, a diversity of approaches that is likewise extended to powerful institutions like Yale and Harvard (Jetnil-Kijiner, 72). Refusal to acknowledge the benefits of divestment would render these universities the very "businesses with broken morals" that pose an existential threat to the Marshall Islands (Jetnil-Kijiner, 71). As it turns out, this notion that divestment is unfeasible due to high consumer demand is exactly the argument asserted by well-known anti-environmental lobbyist groups, including the Environmental Policy Alliance and the American Energy Alliance (Carrington). Some even imply that fossil fuel divestment is a personal choice rather than a political responsibility: when the University of California system divested from fossil fuels, economic consultants argued that "fiduciary duties" should outweigh the choices of "individuals who don't like fossil fuel companies for whatever reason," and that the risk associated with divestment should not be forced on a "public entity like the University of California system" (Artz). Yet even if Yale University were not a private entity, I disagree with this reasoning due to

the global impact that divestment would have, both directly on the environment and indirectly by pressuring other institutions: when "personal decisions" have such a broad impact, then the boundaries between the personal and political become arbitrary. Jetnil-Kijiner unabashedly admits the fear of seeing "the entire ocean__level___with the land", a grim reality that blurs the lines between the personal and political for many Marshallese (Jetnil-Kijiner, 66). Whether for better or for worse, the very action of separating the personal and the political is a privilege that neither powerful institutions like Yale and Harvard nor marginalized groups like the Marshallese are able to exercise.

That left me with one last concern: if I refused to participate in the protest, would I be remaining apolitical, or would my inaction itself make a statement? *Iep Jaltok* suggests that inaction may contribute to the climate crisis equally as much as active pushback against climate action, relating the dangers of inaction to gendered notions of passivity. She begins and ends the collection with poems named "Basket", which portray women as the givers of life, valued primarily for fertility. Some argue that this also extends to the way in which the Marshall Islands as a whole is viewed by the United States, given that "colonial views feminize the Pacific and its small island nations as empty, passive, and ahistorical, which preconditions and justifies exploitation," allowing for "various forms of environmental destruction, including dumping nuclear and toxic waste" (Starr 119). Jetnil-Kijiner takes care to dispel of such passivity in poems like "Dear Matafele Peinam", which, despite having been presented to the U.N. as a plea for more aggressive action against climate change, also contains empowering diction portraying the Marshall Islands as a sovereign nation fighting for its own survival. To her young child, she firmly states that "we are drawing the line / here", that "we are going to fight", and that "we deserve / to thrive" (Jetnil-Kijiner, 73). Jetnil-Kijiner takes motherly love and distills it into an

inspiring re-envisioning of womanhood from passive to active, a declaration of the undeniable and unsunken existence of the Marshall Islands. By repeating the word "we", Jetnil-Kijiner draws the reader into the conflict, assigning responsibility to the reader as playing an equal role in solving one of the most pressing threats to not only the Marshall Islands, but to all of humanity. In doing so, Jetnil-Kijiner refuses to portray her people as a desperate nation in need of the protection of more powerful countries. Rather, she implicates all the countries of the world as equally capable of achieving climate action. By refusing to take part in the protest, I would be ignoring this responsibility, especially given my privilege as a Yale student who undoubtedly benefits from countless amenities that are funded by an endowment that actively supports the growth of fossil fuel companies that otherwise have no incentive to care about the people of Puerto Rico and the Marshall Islands (Kane). Every choice that I could make would be political—just as passivity would make Yale and Harvard complicit in the climate crisis, it would make me so as well.

Thus I decide to participate. On November 23rd, 2019, I protest at the Yale-Harvard football game. I chant from the stands, I pass out pamphlets to justifiably confused spectators, and I watch in awe as "hundreds of fans rushed to join the protesters on the field" with John Denver's "Take Me Home, Country Roads" blaring surrealistically over the speakers (O'Daly). One man yells, "How did you get here? Did you drive?" and despite the fact that we took the shuttle, I am reminded of the fossil fuel industry's narrative that the burden of resolving climate change should somehow fall upon the consumer (Carrington). After our peers are arrested, I and a few others stay back and hold a sign in the stands until the very end of the game, at which point we run to the shuttle, ride back to Yale's campus, and celebrate our work.

After the event, social media blows up with both praise and criticism for the protest. As I scroll through headlines and tweets and social media posts, I notice that almost every article, whether in support of the protest or otherwise, reduces the action to a mere "climate change protest". Divestment, the very goal of the protest, is buried in the articles, and Puerto Rican debt is left as an afterthought, with one article merely stating that "some activists, who were also demanding that the universities cancel their holdings in Puerto Rican debt, were arrested," devoting literally less than a sentence to the issue (O'Daly). *Iep Jaltok* describes journalists who sensationalize the climate crisis of the Marshall Islands, feeding off the image of "cracked plywood walls" flooding with water and guilt-ridden Marshallese women devastated by the loss of their homes, and how such journalists ignore that "all you want now / is to move / forward" (Jetnil-Kijiner, 75). The journalists described by Jetnil-Kijiner may have underlying good intentions, as the notion of helpless and vulnerable Marshallese communities, despite capitalizing upon white saviorism, is nevertheless a convenient narrative to inspire action on climate change. However, this narrative continues to damage the autonomy and cultural self-sufficiency of nations like the Marshall Islands that continue to fight to break free from their colonial legacies. In a similar manner, oversimplification of media coverage of the Yale-Harvard game protest proves counterproductive, obscuring the connections between the institutional powers of Yale and Harvard and the actual goals of the protest. The cancellation of Puerto Rican debt was virtually ignored on account of it being somewhat more complicated to explain than fossil fuel divestment, and *Iep Jaltok* highlights how this decision reflects certain sensationalist trends in media that continue to harm marginalized communities. Yale's own response to the protest spun the narrative even further by focusing exclusively on the issue of free speech, asserting that "it is regrettable that the orchestrated protest came during a time when fellow

students were participating in a collegiate career-defining contest and an annual tradition" ("Statement"). In fact, even among the student body, much of the criticism of the protest surrounded the timing, with one Yale student asking "Why did they pick the Game over the Yale Symphony Orchestra's Halloween Concert, Convocation, or James Comey's visit?" (Tuckerman) and another describing the protest as "the college-version of a toddler's meltdown" (Elizondo). Yet *Iep Jaltok* refutes this notion that there can be any appropriate time for a protest at all. During World War II, the American military tested atomic bombs on the Marshall Islands and justified the destruction of the islands with radioactive fallout by outweighing "*the good of mankind*" over the lives of a relatively small Marshallese population (Jetnil-Kijiner, 21). Jetnil-Kijiner makes clear that this was not acceptable, and that the exploitation of the Marshall Islands for U.S. military purposes was not justified by the urgency of the situation. After all, World War II was indeed a time of great uncertainty—if exploitation was unacceptable then, why would it be acceptable now? The usage of timing as an excuse to disparage the actions of the Yale-Harvard game activists is a reprisal of the same logic that led to the bombing of the Marshall Islands, because there is never a right time. Media outlets, much like universities, have a social responsibility to convey complex situations without ignoring inconvenient nuances or pushing a profitable agenda. *Iep Jaltok* sets a framework for thinking about the climate crisis that draws these institutions into the climate crisis as an issue in which we all have a part to play, whether through protest or divestment.

And perhaps the most troubling misconception to me, and the most personal, is that the protesters of the Yale-Harvard game are mindless liberal drones whose only motivations were to follow the crowd. Perhaps I may be a "curious and mostly capable" first-year whose "young mind" has been corrupted by "juvenile self-righteousness", and perhaps there is some discussion

to be had about the state of freedom of expression at Yale and the ways in which it may be improved—but this politically convenient narrative not only ignores the countless nuanced reasons why one might have felt compelled to protest, but also absolves powerful institutions from doing their share in the climate crisis by villainizing the individual protester, whether for doing it at the wrong time or for doing it at all (Elizondo). *Iep Jaltok* bridges the gap between the climate crisis of the Marshall Islands and the actions of institutions like Yale and Harvard, setting forth startling parallels between the historical exploitation of the Marshallese people and the current complicity of Yale and Harvard in funding fossil fuel companies that threaten the very existence of the Marshallese and the livelihood of the Puerto Ricans. Yale and Harvard have a responsibility to divest from these companies, and until they do, increased pressure from student activists appears to be the most effective solution.

On the way back, a message pops up in the Yale Endowment Justice Coalition group chat. It reads, "Guys my uber driver to the train station just hugged me and said that he was Puerto Rican and said thank you for protesting [sic]," and I am filled with warmth. However, I believe the gratitude extends far beyond the protesters. I know the thanks, in part, goes to the compelling poems from a Marshallese daughter who convinced a student halfway across the world to do what was right. The thanks goes to the soft, hopeful image of "a toddler / stomping squeaky / yellow light up shoes / across the edge of a reef / not yet / under water" (Jetnil-Kijiner, 79).

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