

Beyond the Tenth Horizon: Robert Barclay's *Melal*

David Gugin
University of Guam

Abstract

This article develops a synthesis of contemporary postcolonial and environmental, or ecological, literary criticism. It combines a postcolonial insistence on the validation of indigenous lifestyles, cultures, and epistemologies with a bioregional emphasis on narrative reinhabitation and the ecology of ideas. The article articulates and applies that analytical approach to Robert Barclay's *Melal: A Novel of the Pacific*, a novel written against the backdrop of the United States government's 1954 detonation of a hydrogen bomb on Bikini Atoll in the Marshall Islands. Focusing on the struggle of the Marshallese people to reclaim their place-identity and thus their right to live in an ecologically healthy environment, the article also suggests that current definitions of place-identity and indigeneity need to be rethought in order for the Marshallese to succeed in that struggle. The article concludes by linking the increasingly serious, potentially devastating environmental situation in the Marshalls to the broader, global campaign for environmental justice and sustainable ecologies.

Keywords: postcolonial literary criticism, eco-criticism, environmental literature, bioregionalism, narrative reinhabitation, Oceania, *Melal*

On March 1, 1954, the United States detonated Castle Bravo on Bikini Atoll in the Marshall Islands. With a 15 megaton yield, Castle Bravo was the most powerful hydrogen bomb ever tested by the United States. Because scientists had predicted a much smaller yield, and because of an unexpected shift in the wind, the explosion of Castle Bravo caused the greatest accidental radioactive contamination in United States history. Designed as a secret test, fallout from the detonation spread from the recently evacuated Bikini to neighboring Rongelap, Rongerik and Utirik Atolls, whose residents were not evacuated until several days after the blast, when they were already beginning to show symptoms of radiation sickness. Returned to their homes three years later, they were subsequently evacuated again when the atolls were determined to be unsafe for human habitation. Among its many aftereffects, Castle Bravo left a long legacy of birth defects, miscarriages, and stillborns – what many Marshallese women came to call “jellyfish babies” – to remind future generations of what had been done to their islands and their ocean.

It is against this backdrop of atomic experimentation and Cold War power politics that the events of Robert Barclay's *Melal: A Novel of the Pacific* occur. Unfolding on a single day – Good Friday, 1981 – Barclay tells the story of Rujen Keju and his two sons Jebro and Nuke. Living in the Marshallese enclave of Ebeye on Kwajalein Island, Rujen rides the ferry every day to the American zone on Kwajalein, where he is a senior wastewater worker at the sewage plant, a job he takes great pride in. He is a widower, whose wife Iia had been a young girl on Rongelap when the Castle Bravo test was conducted. Later, as an adult, she once described the experience to her eldest son Jebro, telling him how “one morning just before dawn she saw from a window what she thought was a moon rising in the west. It was so bright that trees, the ground, the lagoon, everything became awash in its reddish glow. Not long after that a tremendous wind blasted in [and a few hours later] an ashy powder began to fall” (80). Told by an American doctor that she was one of the “lucky ones” since she had remained inside throughout the day of the detonation, Iia never contracted any of the various cancers that killed so many of the

Rongelap victims of Castle Bravo. However, as her husband Rujen was painfully aware, she had suffered numerous miscarriages during their marriage, finally dying from one when their youngest son Nuke was three years old.

Appropriately, given its Micronesian setting, *Melal* focuses on the underlying complexities of kinship networks. One of the novel's central relationship is between Rujen and his two sons, especially Jebro. Rujen himself has become a devout Roman Catholic, trying his best to ignore his past, to accept the diminished nature of Marshallese existence and assimilate into American culture. But his older son has been named after the Marshallese king of the stars, their greatest hero. Although his father has secured for him a coveted, minimum wage job at the wastewater facility, where he will start on the following Monday, Jebro is a young man who very much feels torn between two cultures, two ways of living. He is thus in almost continuous conflict with his father, or rather, his father's world-view. In Marshallese culture, the grandparent-grandchild relationship is given special importance, with alternate generations often seen as allied, sometimes against the parent. So much like his paternal grandfather Ataji, who always resisted the Americanization (ghettoization) of the Marshalls, Jebro still values the traditional ways of living in and perceiving his island environment. He is a skilled fisherman, an expert sailor, more at home in the lagoon or on the open ocean than he is on land.

This empathetic relationship between Jebro and Ataji, counterpointed as it is against Jebro's more oppositional relationship with his father, offers a compelling representation of the distinction Hsinya Huang has made between the transnational and the trans-indigenous. For Huang, any legitimate discussion of identity in sovereign indigenous cultures must move beyond the concept of the spatially or temporally bounded nation, must, in other words, be transnational (xi). Given increasing patterns of both voluntary and involuntary migration, Huang's insistence on moving definitions of identity beyond the territorial nation-state is certainly relevant to the contemporary Marshall Islands and indeed much of the Pacific region. Equally important though, Huang problematizes and politicizes conventional theories of the transnational, arguing that in the United States those theories typically push and confine to the margins any understanding of indigenous peoples and texts, while centering and privileging the mainland, dominant culture (xvi). In *Melal* then, at least for most of the novel, Rujen functions as a perfect symbol of how the transnational, which for Huang is just a nicer, more deceptive name for the colonial, for more of the same inequality and exploitation, effectively reduces and diminishes the indigenous, trapping them in an endless cycle of dependency and environmental degradation. Rujen is no longer really Marshallese, but he can never truly be American.

What Huang wants is to replace a single, center-to-margin, global-to-local, major-to-minor dialogue (or rather, monologue) with multiple and genuine center-to-center dialogues, connecting in a more equitable way the United States and the world with diverse indigenous cultures throughout the Pacific. Such a "trans-Pacific" and "trans-Indigenous" ecopoetics "would foreground an alter/native reckoning of space, place, and time that both requires an active and participatory engagement with the Pacific seascapes and invokes the planetary consciousness" (xvii). Not coincidentally, Barclay wants the same thing, as his characterization of Jebro illustrates. Throughout *Melal*, Jebro is searching for Huang's trans-indigenous approach, desperately trying to avoid the transnational trap his father finds himself in. Well aware that the Americans are not going away, he is not seeking to return to an ideal, pre-contact Marshallese past. But he is determined to maintain a genuine Marshallese identity, a perspective on life that is cognizant of but also independent from mainstream American cultural values and epistemological beliefs.

Huang's articulation of a new critical paradigm is certainly persuasive, though perhaps, as *Melal* demonstrates, incomplete. Because Robert Barclay, even though he spent much of his life in the Marshall Islands and is clearly sympathetic to the Marshallese people and critical of the United States presence there, is himself not Marshallese. This immediately invites some interesting, potentially controversial responses to Huang's argument, since her work seems to imply that no Western, white writer can ever help undermine and supplant the narrative of Western-dominated transnationality. Thus a truly postcolonial novel can never be written by a colonial, from the settler point of view. However, it is the intention here to respectfully disagree, to offer a synthesis of ecological and postcolonial criticism that combines a bioregional emphasis on reinhabitation and the restorative power of narrative with a postcolonial insistence on the validation of indigenous lifestyles. And to use that synthesis to suggest that without re-examining the somewhat dated, static definitions of indigenous and non-indigenous, the paradigm shift that Huang and others desire will not be possible.

Although both seek to challenge the dynamics of power and share the same goal of replacing existing power structures with more egalitarian ones, postcolonial and bioregional literary-critical approaches have typically resisted this kind of synthesis. Postcolonialism will ultimately privilege the human, if necessary at the expense of the environment, while bioregionalism will ultimately privilege the environment, if necessary at the expense of the human. Therefore, what is first needed is a way out of this inherent tension between the two approaches. In her insightful reading of Ben Okri's novel *The Famished Road*, Erin James provides such a path, arguing that place-specificity and corresponding mimetic representations of those places should not be limited to or by Western sensibilities (263).

Thematically and structurally, Okri's novel centers on the experiences of its protagonist Azaro, a "spirit-child" moving back and forth between the natural and supernatural worlds just prior to Nigerian independence in 1960. For James, this constant migration across supposedly fixed boundaries calls into question typical empirical distinctions between the rational and the irrational, distinctions that she feels are inherently biased, an assertion that the Marshallese, for whom the natural and supernatural are inseparable dimensions of everyday experience, would agree with. Okri himself has said that true colonialism does not occur when one society has been occupied by another materially, but when it has been taken over in terms of "its mind and its dreams and its myths, and its perceptions of reality" (266). James then is rejecting the colonial appropriation of perception in favor of a more fluid, open-ended, multidimensional, postcolonial, in this case, Yoruba, aesthetic. What emerges is the possibility of a union between this postcolonial emphasis on equal forms of perception and the bioregional emphasis on sustainable interrelationships between people and places, a hybrid approach capable of eliminating traditional dichotomies between Western transnational and non-Western trans-indigenous texts, readings, and authors.

Like *The Famished Road*, a second key relationship in *Melal* is between the human and mythological worlds. Barclay alternates two narratives throughout the novel, juxtaposing Rujen's family history with Marshallese cosmology, focusing on Etao, a quintessential trickster hero, and Noniep, a dream-speaking dwarf. Both Etao and Noniep are interventionist figures, moving constantly between the physical, material world and the spiritual world of demons and magic, operating both diachronically, across time, and synchronically, at a given point in time. Against his father's wishes, Jebro begins his Good Friday by sailing from Ebeye with his younger brother to their birth-island of Tar-Woj, which Nuke has never seen before and where their grandfather is buried. Tar-Woj is a restricted area in the Marshalls, within the Mid-Corridor zone, serving as a

test target for guided missiles launched from the United States mainland. As a result of this appropriation of territory, it is against the law for the boys to visit their ancestral homeland, which is why Rujen is opposed to their plan. Jebro and Nuke go anyway, and as they are leaving the Ebeye dock “Jebro’s eye caught a bright flash overhead that came from the east. At first he thought it was one of the American missiles streaking toward the lagoon, but the burning glow and vapor trail looked different, erratic, prismatic, and seeing it brought on a strange sense of familiarity or kinship” (12). In fact, it is Etao returning from his travels at a blazing speed and diving directly for the middle of the lagoon. From the very beginning the narrative structure of *Melal* connects its human and mythological characters, in the process unifying the novel’s formal and thematic properties.

This integrated textual strategy also allows Barclay to explore another of the main relationships in *Melal*. Underlying the specific familial tension that exists between Rujen and Jebro, and between Rujen and his late father Ataji, is the more general psychic tension caused by the almost overwhelming impact of American lifestyles and American modes of perception on indigenous culture and society. The high suicide rates of young Marshallese men are referenced several times, but Barclay’s larger point is that once the assimilation (subjugation) of the Marshallese imagination to the American imagination is complete, the essence of what it means to be Marshallese will be lost forever. Noniep understands the danger, so he too has come to Tar-Woj. The last of an ancient race of dwarves who died out because they could no longer remember how to fish, he knows on this day he will be killed by a host of demon spirits who intend to destroy both him and the Marshallese people. Noniep, his body and skin covered by interlocking triangles of tattoos, is “so old and wrinkled that his face looks like a dark rock [. . .] He sits on a sitting mat, chanting knowledge into an extraordinarily tall breadfruit tree” (84). Noniep is determined that the old traditions, the old ways of seeing, do not pass with him, that instead they are passed on to future generations of Marshallese.

As the final repository of Marshallese experience, Noniep wants his people to first understand who they are and where they came from, to remember that their true home, their true place, is the ocean. He fills the breadfruit tree with the knowledge of canoe-building, of navigational skills, how to read even the smallest change on the ocean’s surface, how to survive on long ocean journeys. Turning to the sky, he chants the patterns and locations of stars and constellations, the names of islands that each star will lead the voyager to, the names of other stars that will lead to farther islands, and finally, the names of opposing stars that will guide the voyager back home. But Noniep also wants the Marshallese to remember their more recent past, their colonial history, what has happened to them as a people. He chants of the Spanish who seized the islands, promising “life through Christ and giv[ing] death through syphilis,” of the Germans and Japanese who enriched themselves through the forced labor of the Marshallese, of missionaries who would not allow them to practice the magic that taught them the ways of navigation and proper health and behavior, of the Americans “who brought the bomb and jellyfish babies and Happy Days on TV” (86). Most of all though, Noniep chants into the breadfruit tree to remind the Marshallese of what they could be and of what they must do to regain their identity and restore their sense of place.

Noniep’s appearances in the novel are crucial because they serve as a reminder that any definition of place is inadequate if it does not recognize the central role that the imagination plays in establishing and maintaining mutually healthy environmental relationships. Noniep’s active interpenetration of the material and the imaginative fit well within a cognitive framework that asks and answers questions about how it is we actually “know” or understand a place.

Echoing Gregory Bateson, Serenella Iovino insists that “within and around the ecology of living forms an ecology of ideas, or of mind, exists, which strictly interacts with the former one.” Here mind is no longer simply a synonym for self or brain, but rather, in Iovino’s words, “an ecological function mirroring [. . .] the interrelatedness between the self and the environment” (104). What results from this perspective is a necessary re-conceiving of the human mind. No longer seen as a separate, isolated, discrete entity, it can now be viewed as a locus of intersection where the internal and the external, the self and the material world, meet, interact and co-exist. In short, for Iovino, “to imagine a place is to always imagine *with* a place” (105). And this imaginative act, this ecology of mind, is a prerequisite for any long term, sustainable strategy of environmental renewal.

As Iovino points out, a community, society or culture becomes fundamentally disconnected from the environment when it has become alienated from its imagination of that environment. Such a disconnect is ultimately schizophrenic and is the base cause of any ecological crisis. Effective solutions to environmental problems, effective treatments for environmental “diseases,” solutions and treatments that address causes not symptoms, therefore require a re-imagining of self and nature that eliminates the disunities that typically characterize their relationship. False dualities, false dichotomies, must be resolved, unified, for the sake of environmental survival. Iovino refers to this process as “narrative reinhabitation,” which she describes as a “cultural-educational practice that consists of restoring the ecological imagination of place by working with place-based stories” (106). It is not the scientists only who will save us, but the writers and the artists – the dreamers, the imaginers, the Jebros and Nonieps.

Along with dwelling and sustainability, one of the crucial terms in any bioregional approach is reinhabitation. But it is important to remember that this notion of reinhabitation is decidedly activist in meaning, in that the goal is not just to limit environmental damage and live sustainably in the present and future but to fix the damage that has already been done in the past. As more and more people become detached from their environments, forced from their environments, have their environments taken away from them through war or climate change, more and more people become deterritorialized (Lynch, Glotfelty, and Armbruster 6). The goal is for people to reterritorialize, re-map, their lives. What Iovino has rather elegantly done is to take this original bioregional concept of reinhabitation and extend it into the realms of imagination and narrative. By deepening the intended meaning of reinhabitation, she has also articulated a way forward, or really, a way back, since what she is talking about is how to imaginatively create newer, different, more open endings for places and the people that live within them, to revisit the past. In doing so, narrative reinhabitation also forces us to re-envision the future. Interestingly enough, Iovino herself is not a native of, or indigenous to, Italy’s Po River Valley which she writes so movingly about.

In two articles written in the 1990s, Tongan scholar Epeli Hau‘ofa, working out of the University of the South Pacific in Suva, Fiji, created the theoretical justification for a radically different way of viewing, interpreting and re-mapping Pacific island communities, countries and cultures. His arguments are relevant here because so many of them anticipate various postcolonial and bioregional approaches, notably Huang’s and Iovino’s. First of all, in “Our Sea of Islands,” he points out that perceptions of the Pacific originating at the macroeconomic and international (transnational) political level are typically quite different than the perceptions of ordinary people, actual Pacific islanders. Since their perceptions are often dismissed or ignored entirely, Hau‘ofa wants a new vision, one based on a grassroots understanding of how Pacific islanders live their lives and how they relate to their environment (148). Most especially, he

wants to undermine the prevailing spatial paradigm of the Pacific, a paradigm based on smallness. He writes that according to this view “all of Polynesia and Micronesia are much too small, too poorly endowed with resources, and too isolated from the centers of economic growth for their inhabitants ever to be able to rise above their present condition of dependence” (150). Because they live in such tiny, allegedly impoverished places, Pacific islanders will always be members of so-called MIRAB societies, perpetually requiring migration, remittances, aid and bureaucracy in order to survive.

Hau‘ofa imagines a new ecology of ideas that reconceptualizes both space and place, one that is not land- but sea-based. Sharing the postcolonial and bioregional critique and suspicion of arbitrarily imposed political boundaries such as cities, states and nations, he believes that such boundaries are debilitating, confining people, for instance, the inhabitants of the Marshall Islands, to not only physical but mental reservations as well. Anyone looking at most Micronesian, Polynesian or Melanesian islands would consider them small since he or she is focusing only on land surfaces. But Hau‘ofa notes that any careful study of the myths, legends, and traditions of Pacific islanders will reveal that they did not conceive of their world as tiny at all, encompassing as it did the land itself, the surrounding ocean, the underworld and the sky (heavens) above. Hau‘ofa rejects the colonial view of the Pacific as “islands in a far sea,” a description that emphasizes the smallness and remoteness of “dry surfaces in a vast ocean far from the centers of power” (152). Hau‘ofa would agree that at its core narrative reinhabitation is the act of re-naming. He understands that to perceive, to imagine differently, is to re-identify and then reclaim.

Instead of colonial labels and colonial narratives, Hau‘ofa prefers what he considers to be more historically and environmentally accurate designations. Referring to “ocean peoples” rather than “Pacific Islanders,” he describes the region not as “islands in a far sea” but as Oceania, “a sea of islands.” He writes that “people raised in this environment were at home with the sea. They played in it as soon as they could walk steadily, they worked in it, they fought on it. They developed great skills for navigating their waters, and the spirit to traverse the few large gaps that separated their island groups” (153). Because of the ocean and their relationship with it, theirs was a large world. More importantly, when viewed and experienced from the vantage point of everyday people at the micro-level, it has become a large world once again. Hau‘ofa has no interest in nostalgia, nor does he embrace romanticized notions of the past, believing that such notions only serve to advance a neo-colonial agenda. His argument is that 19th century imperialism established artificial boundaries that ignored the environmental, economic, and sociocultural realities of the Pacific region, resulting in the spatial and perceptual contraction of that region. But with the rise of the global economy, which has no real use for and thus ignores these artificial boundaries, a renewed expansion is occurring (155). The people of Oceania are on the move again. Significantly though, Hau‘ofa tends to assume that most of this movement is voluntary.

Nonetheless, whether voluntary or not, the identity-formation that emerges out of this renewed, increasing mobility, reflects both a conscious and subconscious rejection of real and perceived isolation in favor of true interconnectedness. It is a process motivated not by dependence but interdependence. It focuses not on individual islands, nations, and territories as discrete, endlessly competitive entities, but rather as equally valuable components of a larger, mutually reinforcing network. As Hau‘ofa so eloquently puts it: “Oceania is us. We are the sea, we are the ocean, we must wake up to this ancient truth and together use it to overturn all hegemonic views that aim ultimately to confine us again, physically and psychologically, in the

tiny spaces that we have resisted accepting as our sole appointed places” (160). Clearly, it is this more profound, biologically-informed sense of self and place, this “survival unity” (in Bateson’s phrase) that will form the foundation of any successful effort to protect and renew, to dwell sustainably in, the Pacific Ocean itself.

This vital restoration of place imagination is fictionalized in *Melal* as a struggle for souls. Consistent with his narrative structure, Barclay dramatizes that struggle at both the human and mythological levels. On this particular Good Friday, Rujen has been having a bad morning. He has had a public disagreement with his eldest son, someone has taken his preferred seat on the ferry, his expensive workboots have been stolen, and his bicycle has been vandalized. Late for work, he gets lost taking a shortcut through an empty elementary school. A man who prides himself on his professionalism and self-control, he has a sudden crisis of faith. Frustrated, pacing quickly back and forth, he is agitated by the thought that his life has no meaning or purpose and that he has lost his soul. Rujen temporarily overcomes this feeling of emptiness and continues on to his job, where he learns from his American supervisors that two other Marshallese workers have just returned to the plant after catching two dolphins. The Americans are puzzled about how they could have caught them. When Rujen explains that they used rocks, the Americans assume he meant hitting them with rocks. Rujen replies that the Marshallese have known for centuries that hitting two rocks together underwater confuses the dolphins’ visual sonar, making them dizzy, tricking them into beaching themselves. His supervisors are horrified, insisting that such practices violate United States law. Habitually deferential to American authority, Rujen stands his ground for once. He gets uncharacteristically angry and responds that the men were simply following traditional customs.

The miscommunication, the misunderstanding, between Rujen and the Americans is emblematic of a larger North-South, settler-indigenous division within the global environmental movement. As discussed by Jonathan Steinwand, the North American/Western European variant of environmentalism has a tendency to “mourn what we have killed in nature [. . .] what we have helped to destroy” (183). It also has a tendency to universalize its concerns and agendas, in the process devaluing or dismissing the lifestyles and cultures of local inhabitants. In a close reading of Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*, Steinwand focuses on a passage in the novel where the protagonist, a visiting biologist, is initially appalled by a group of villagers who are preparing to kill a predatory tiger. Eventually though she gains insight into how conservation policies she has always uncritically supported seldom take into account the people who are most affected by those policies. Steinwand concludes that we should pay much more attention to the survival strategies that “provide localized challenges to environmental universalism, correctives to the sentimentalizing tendencies of environmentalism, and the caution that a sustainable future must avoid imperialist nostalgia” (185). In the incident of the dolphins, it is this paradox of global environmentalism, this imperialist nostalgia, that Rujen is facing, because it is not the Marshallese who have been wiping out dolphin stocks all over the world.

Late again, Rujen arrives at the afternoon Mass at the Kwajalein Catholic Church, where he is an usher and the only Marshallese member, a fact of considerable psychological importance to him. He is immediately confronted by what Steinwand refers to as “the paradox of global environmentalism,” the irony that “those who worry the most about the destruction of nature are usually those who are making the problem worse” (194) – in this case, a “Save-the-Dolphins” fundraising campaign organized by the American parishioners, who are appalled and outraged by what the uncivilized Marshallese have done to the two dolphins. Thoroughly unsettled, he notices that the cloth veiling the Crucifix at the front of the altar has bunched up. Attempting to

repent for his perceived sins, and to achieve some kind of inner peace, he walks up to the crucifix, conscious that all the Americans in the room are silently watching and judging him. Although shaken by the events of the day, and his currently exposed position as the center-of-attention in the church, he regains his faith, no longer doubting how he has chosen to live his life or define himself.

In possibly the most powerful passage in the novel, Rujen jumps up to rearrange the veil. Unfortunately, he ends up losing his balance instead, crashing to the floor and accidentally pulling down the entire crucifix, severing the head of Jesus from the rest of the statue. Lying on the floor in pain, bleeding from puncture wounds in his hand from the thorns on Christ's crown, he is utterly humiliated and knows he will never be allowed to set foot inside the Kwajalein Catholic Church again. Just at that moment, just when it seems "as though his soul had gone and left him nothing but his shame [. . .] his eyes found two shining points of light, drawing forth with a soothing glow – they were the eyes of Christ looking up at him from the altar, Marshallese eyes. And they spoke to him. And by the grace of God they offered him a way to redeem his soul" (207). Ticketed and fined by the American authorities later that evening for trespassing on Marshallese land because he has missed the ferry back to Ebeye and broken the American curfew, Rujen has finally had his epiphany. He should have gone with his sons to Tor-Woj to visit his father's grave. His life, his thoughts, his dreams should be Marshallese. But what it now means to be Marshallese is still to be addressed.

Hau'ofa foreshadows Barclay's eventual answer to that question in *Melal* in his later article "The Ocean in Us," where he develops a more specifically political and environmental program linked to his earlier call for a regional, ocean-based place identity. Valuing multiplicity, and recognizing that there is strength in diversity, he makes it clear that he is not suggesting that other existing ethnic and cultural identities be ignored or replaced. Instead he wants to build on them to create a true, locally-generated, genuinely independent regionalism that would challenge and supplant the various externally-imposed regionalisms that Oceania has historically suffered under (393). Again, for Hau'ofa, specifically referencing the Bikini hydrogen bomb tests, the essential problem is one of mapping, the inability to "define our world and ourselves without direct and often heavy external influence" (397). But he is well aware of the difficulties associated with building viable, substantive regional institutions and organizations that move beyond just the cultivation and celebration of some amorphous, undefined, difficult to quantify feeling of commonality. Still, he is convinced that by adopting a "one ocean, one people" approach these difficulties can be overcome and a sustainable Oceanic identity can be created.

Hau'ofa believes that without an all-encompassing practical and ethical vision of the sea as open and free-flowing it will be impossible to escape the crippling effects of material and metaphysical insularity. Noting that the region has achieved its strongest sense of unity when confronting environmental threats to the Pacific Ocean, he argues that "no specific country in the Pacific can by itself protect its own slice of the oceanic environment: the very nature of that environment prescribes regional effort. And to develop the ocean resources sustainably, regional unity is required" (401). Crucially however, he insists that the ocean is not simply a continuing literal or physical reality, it is also the most powerful metaphor available to all inhabitants of the Pacific. Both literally and symbolically, all of us living in Oceania are thus able to "range beyond the tenth horizon, secure in the knowledge of the home base to which we will always return for replenishments and revisions of the purposes and directions of our journeys" (408). Departure and return, migration and the voyage back, the traveler in motion and the traveler at rest – this then is Hau'ofa's ocean.

The key plot developments in the mythological world of *Melal* reflect Hau'ofa's radical reshaping of how Oceania should be perceived and, more importantly, how Oceania should perceive itself. They also reflect his insistence on the centrality of the ocean to the identity of all Pacific islanders, including of course the Marshallese. Noniep has called Jebro to Tar-Woj because his transformation of the breadfruit tree into the collective cultural and historical. Oceanic memory of the Marshallese people is not complete until he can place part of a human soul inside the tree. Reaching out from the spirit world he rubs his fingers together and a watery ball emerges from the back of Jebro's head, rolling on the air to Noniep's hands. He gently caresses the ball, Jebro's soul, until it releases a small, fish egg-sized portion of itself, which Noniep puts inside the tree. He then sends the rest of the soul back into Jebro's head. Near the end of the novel, and just after his temporal death, Noniep fights an epic battle with his enemies for control of the souls of all the Marshallese people. Rising from the darkening ocean into the wind, "He finds waiting for him his spirit-canoe, and it speaks to him, reminding him of who he is and of the souls he has died to save" (281). Much like the Marshallese eyes on the statue of Jesus that Rujen stared into back on Kwajalein, Noniep is revealed as an indigenous, culturally authentic Christ figure, sacrificing his life to redeem his people.

Fittingly, that redemption will and must be spiritual, psychological, and ecological. Throughout *Malal* Barclay provides chilling descriptions of the environmental degradation of the Marshall Islands, of Ebeye especially, a quintessential "necroregion," to borrow Iovino's term. In the opening chapter, Rujen makes his way to the toilet room of his concrete blockhouse, walking slowly through the cramped quarters past the snoring bodies of 14 clan members and eight family members. Once there he conducts his morning ritual of shooting rats in the corners and crevices of the blockhouse, noticing only later the sewage bubbling up into the kitchen sink. That morning at the Ebeye pier, which lacking proper maintenance is gradually falling apart, Rujen can see to his right past the oily polluted water to wooden slum shacks on stilts. He can see that beyond the slowly burning heaps of trash festering in the garbage dump the coral reef, critical to the island's ecosystem, is littered with piles of cars, trucks, and heavy machinery melting together into various shades of orange and black. In Ebeye thousands of people are crammed into less than a square mile of space, with predictable consequences for themselves and for the environment. Even more disturbing, the characters in *Melal* typically view this destruction as normal, referring to the ever-present flies as the Ebeye Air Force, joking about fishing for soiled Pampers from the pier or racing beer can boats on the reef.

The Marshallese loss of place identity, the deformation of their ecology of ideas, is thus mirrored in their almost complete alienation from the environment in which they live. Inhabiting a "land made ugly," the dominant motif in Barclay's description of Ebeye is human feces. The fact that Rujen derives his livelihood and status from processing the Americans' sewage on Kwajalein – literally, taking shit from them – only serves to reinforce that motif. The American-built toilet system dumps raw sewage into the lagoon, and with the system breaking down constantly from the population pressure, the sewage often leaks back onto shore. Many Marshallese had abandoned the toilets altogether, simply going outside to relieve themselves. When Rujen does so at night he always brings along a flashlight to avoid "stepping in someone else's mess." In daylight, he could see "clumps of toilet paper and turds all over the breakwater, waiting for wind or waves or rain to wash them away." He has a friend who always says that the breakwater looked like it had been attacked from the air by "a giant shit-bombing shitbird" (92). Plagued by rats, mosquitoes, flies, tapeworms and parasites, often eating contaminated fish from the lagoon, riddled by skin infections, diarrhea and radiation-related cancers, waiting for a long-

promised, decent hospital that had yet to materialize, the people of Ebeye, an Americanization of the Marshallese word *epia*, meaning “mostly capsized,” are experiencing an environmental nightmare.

As mentioned before, literary ecocriticism typically seeks to move beyond the anthropocene in an effort to encourage and create what it considers to be sustainable natural environments, no matter what the short-term human cost might be. Postcolonial criticism responds that such a rejection of the anthropocene is politically, economically, and socially premature, if not immoral, at least in the short-term, given that so many people continue to live such highly marginalized existences. The issue really is whether or not environmental justice should apply primarily, initially, to the human or the non-human world, whether or not environmental justice has to be achieved by focusing first on the one and only then on the other. Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George Handley argue that the two approaches, the two value systems, are not mutually exclusive and that any apparent tension between them can and should be resolved because if the environment does stand as a “nonhuman witness to the violence of colonialism,” then an engagement with the environment must form a fundamental element of postcolonial thought. What is necessary is to recognize “the interdependent histories of metropole and colony,” the crucial role that “the exploitation of natural resources plays in any imperialist project,” the linkage between empire building and environmental history (10.) Instead of a literature of nature or a literature of empire, there should be a literature of nature and empire. *Melal* is such a text.

DeLoughrey and Handley also claim that from a postcolonial standpoint “an ecological frame is vital to understanding how geography has been and still is radically altered by colonialism, including resource use, stewardship, and sovereignty” (24). The intentional irradiation of an entire island and subsequent poisoning of a generation (or more) of indigenous people, the principle events that historicize *Melal*, seem like a persuasive illustration of the underlying ecological violence of colonialism, as does Rujen’s consistently subservient relationship to his American supervisors and American fellow parishioners. DeLoughrey and Handley believe too that a mutually reinforcing postcolonial ecocriticism offers the opportunity to scrutinize Enlightenment and social hierarchies and dualisms such as nature/culture, white/black, and, especially, European/other. In *Melal*, this relaxing, or rethinking, of these binary oppositions, this answer to the question of what it means to be Marshallese, is not complete but is at least emergent near the end of the novel, when Jebro and Travis, an American teenager who shares Jebro’s love of fishing and the sea, start to become friends. In addition, through its supernatural narratives and its concurrent embrace of the natural world, land and sea, *Melal*, which is simultaneously a powerful social and political critique of the American occupation of the Marshall Islands, validates DeLoughrey and Handley’s belief that postcolonial ecocriticism can move beyond anthropocentrism while still articulating the need for environmental justice. Finally, and similar to Hau‘ofa, who defines “inhabitants of Oceania” quite broadly and in ethical as opposed to racial terms, they want continued engagement with the questions of who can “speak for nature,” or who can speak for the colonized, without perpetuating debilitating dualisms or unequal relationships between people and between the human and nonhuman. If *Melal* is indeed a novel about a “capsized people,” how will their voices be heard?

Capsized or not, the fact that the Marshallese have been able to survive in such severe environmental conditions is impressive enough. But to his credit, Barclay is trying to do more than just celebrate the continued existence of a people and culture in the face of difficult

circumstances. Also to his credit, although he has written a novel highly critical of the American occupation of the Marshalls (and rightfully so), he is not interested in just blaming the colonizer. What he wants, and what *Melal* suggests, is a path to a better future, for both Marshallese and Americans. Identifying and dramatizing the problem is not enough – potential solutions must be found. And these solutions must be realistic in that they reject nostalgic, romanticized views of a given people's past, recognizing that a retreat into some sort of pre-Western arcadia is neither an answer nor an option, especially for the younger generation. For better or for worse, the Marshall Islands are in a postcontact cultural situation and to pretend otherwise would be not only naïve but also counterproductive. Jebro himself understands this truth. Admitting to his brother Nuke that the Marshallese can no longer live like they did in the past, he also insists that merely trying to copy Americans is foolish. He knows that in the contemporary world money is a necessity. However, he tells Nuke that he does not intend to be a worker for the Americans whose hobby is fishing, but rather a fisherman whose hobby is working for the Americans. Jebro states proudly that he has his own life, not a life given to him by the Americans. It is this rhetorical stance, this perceptual attitude of adaptation not assimilation, that Barclay believes is crucial to any potential psychological, cultural, and ecological renewal of Ebeye and the entire Marshall Islands.

During the course of *Melal*, Jebro begins to accept that the kind of life he wishes to live will require a deeper accommodation with at least some Americans. While fishing in their father's skiff on the open ocean he and Nuke encounter a bigger, more powerful boat that three American boys – Travis Kotrady, Boyd Lutrell and Kerry Zeder – have taken out for the day. Competing for the same school of tuna, Jebro outmaneuvers them, so Boyd in retaliation uses the boat to intentionally swamp Jebro and Nuke. The Americans continue fishing the tuna, not realizing that they have actually sunk Jebro and Nuke three miles from the nearest land. Travis, however, who like Jebro is an excellent fisherman and a lover of the ocean, finally forces Boyd to return to the area, demanding that they find out what has actually happened. Travis notices a large ak, or frigate bird, which Jebro believes is the spirit of his grandfather watching over them, somewhat unusually hovering in one spot in the sky. He uses the bird as a marker to locate and save Jebro and Nuke, who are on the verge of drowning. All five of them go back to Kwajalein together. Talking to Jebro on the boatride home, it occurs to Travis that after all the time he had spent in the Marshalls, most of his life actually, he still did not have a single Marshallese friend. Never making the effort to know anyone but Americans had seemed quite natural and had never bothered him before. Jebro, who himself has never tried to befriend any Americans, realizes too that he has been limiting his experiences, narrowing his horizons. Both of them start thinking that it might be fun to fish together, to learn from each other, to build on their common love for the sea a mutually respectful friendship.

This notion that Marshallese and Americans could work together in a relationship of shared values and true interdependency is reinforced in Barclay's conclusion of the mythological component of the novel. Typically dismissive of his friend Noniep's concerns for the souls of the Marshallese, preferring instead to indulge his own almost endless capacity for pleasure, Etao does finally intervene in Noniep's last battle. With Noniep on the brink of defeat, Etao grabs one of the American test missiles streaking toward the islands as part of a United States military exercise. He flings it at Noniep's enemies, killing them instantly. In an intriguing alliance between United States technology and Marshallese mythology, Noniep is able to complete his mission. In an instructive example of Steinwand's notion of "companion species," Noniep finds a group of whales swimming nearby and with their approval he pairs the soul of each whale to the soul of a jellyfish baby, "so that over time, with love, they might stop their squalling and

maybe even learn to sing” (300). Reconciliation and healing are possible. Indeed, neither cannot happen without the other.

In his *Reimagining the American Pacific*, Rob Wilson offers a useful, relevant argument for the possibilities and dangers for local communities and cultures created by the emergent postcolonial, transnational, global world. Without minimizing the risks of such a world, he sees great potential in the process by which the United States in particular continues to be “restructured” and “reimagined” into the “impurity, flexibility, mongrel becoming, and disunity of the postmodern condition” (1-2). For Wilson, there is value in the disorientating nature of this process, triggering as it does the need for a “global/local dialectic optic” designed to help understand and exploit (in the sense of correcting past injustices), the new cultural contact zones that postmodernity is producing (3). Although he focuses primarily on Hawaii and Taiwan, his notion of the postlocal and its concurrent celebration of cultural hybridity and a politics that transcends ethnicity can easily be applied to the Marshall Islands and *Melal*. The point is to successfully interrogate Wilson’s “third spaces of interaction” that are opening up all over the Pacific region (249). It is precisely those third spaces that Jebro and Travis are beginning to explore. It is those third spaces that Robert Barclay is also beginning to explore as a white, American author of an empathetic book about a colonized people in the Pacific Ocean and an environment physically and spiritually poisoned by America.

The larger issue being raised involves place and identity – in short, indigeneity. Because in a time of ongoing migration, movement, and mongrelization (the word is not used pejoratively, either here or by Wilson), a time of “becoming,” it may be time to redefine and expand our definition of indigenous. Huang wants a Pacific literature that represents “center-to-center, indigenous-to-indigenous relationships and connections in the Pacific as a site of transindigenous solidarity that seeks to protect oceanic environments” (121). So does Barclay. She wants a Pacific literature that regards “the Pacific Ocean as a site of cobelonging and cohistory across species boundaries and racial/ethnic and cultural borders” (123). Barclay has written such a novel. But it remains to be seen if traditional postcolonial theory or practice would accept either Barclay or *Melal* as postcolonial, as part of the solution and not part of the problem. Until they do, until authors, critics, and readers, whether white or non-white (a binary distinction that is itself increasingly problematic), find and populate Wilson’s third spaces, it is difficult to see a way forward.

In Marshallese, the word *melal* means “playground for demons, not habitable for people.” Such a definition immediately lends itself to a bioregional approach, because the task then becomes one of reinhabitation. How do people living in “a playground for demons,” human-created environmental demons especially, reconstruct the playground? The synthesis of postcolonial and ecological criticism proposed by Steinwand, and DeLoughrey and Handley, and refined here is one potential solution. If we link a more inclusive version of Huang’s vision of the trans-indigenous to Bateson’s conception of the ecology of ideas and in turn extend that framework to Iovino’s emphasis on the restorative power of narrative and perceptual ethics, we can start to imagine how necroregions can be transformed into organic, sustainable communities, how a dead space can be turned back into a living place. And building on the arguments of scholars like James, Hau‘ofa, and Wilson to explore and reinterpret indigenous, migratory lifestyles and literary forms, we can develop a potentially paradigm-changing critique that unites practice and theory in the best sense of bioregional praxis, applicable to literature from not just the Pacific but from all over the world. For in the final analysis, the struggle of the Marshallese people, the struggle of the people of Oceania, for an historically valid, internally generated, and

externally respected identity is a universal struggle. Not only for moral reasons, but also because the environmental survival of the planet depends on the ecological health of the Pacific. No longer the “hole in the donut,” Oceania is the donut. In a time when rising sea levels are not just affecting but threatening the very existence of islands and coastal communities all over the Pacific and the world, a time when the United States has just withdrawn from the Paris Agreement on climate change, there is much to be done.

Acknowledgement: The author would like to thank Dr. Don Rubinstein of the Micronesian Area Research Center, University of Guam, for his guidance and assistance.

Works Cited

- Barclay, Robert. *Melal: A Novel of the Pacific*. Honolulu: U of Hawaii P. 2002
- DeLoughrey, Elizabeth, and George Handley, eds. Introduction. *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011. 3-39. 2011.
- Hau'ofa, Epeli. “Our Sea of Islands.” *The Contemporary Pacific* 6.1: 147-61. 1994.
- Hau'ofa, Epeli. “The Ocean in Us.” *The Contemporary Pacific* 10.2: 391-410. 1998.
- Huang, Hsinya. Introduction. *Aspects of Transnational and Indigenous Cultures*. Hsinya Huang and Clara Shu-chun Chang, eds. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars. xi-xxii. 2014.
- Huang, Hsinya. “Toward Trans-Pacific Eco-poetics: Three Indigenous Texts.” *Aspects of Transnational and Indigenous Cultures*. Hsinya Huang and Clara Shu-chun Chang, eds. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014. 113-140. 2014.
- Iovino, Serenella. “Restoring the Imagination of Place: Narrative Reinhabitation and the Po River Valley.” *The Bioregional Imagination: Literature, Ecology, and Place*. Tom Lynch, Cheryll Glotfelty, and Karla Armbruster, eds. Athens: U of Georgia P. 100-18. 2012.
- James, Erin. “Bioregionalism, Postcolonial Literatures and Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road*.” *The Bioregional Imagination: Literature, Ecology, and Place*. Tom Lynch, Cheryll Glotfelty, and Karla Armbruster, eds. Athens: U of Georgia P. 263-78. 2012.
- Lynch, Tom, Cheryll Glotfelty, and Karla Armbruster, eds. Introduction. *The Bioregional Imagination: Literature, Ecology, and Place*. Athens: U of Georgia P. 1-29. 2012.
- Steinwand, Jonathan. “What the Whales Would Tell Us: Cetacean Communication in Novels by Witi Imihaera, Linda Hogan, Zakes Mda, and Amitav Ghosh.” *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment*. Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George Handley, eds. Oxford: Oxford UP. 182-199. 2011.
- Wilson, Rob. *Reimagining the American Pacific*. Durham: Duke UP. 2000.