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A novel to influence public policy? The role of New Zealand in climate migration and the occupation of Antarctica

Abstract:

In recent years, the notion of 'climate change fiction' ('cli-fi') has passed into common parlance to denote a strand of fictionalized narratives foregrounding the dynamics and consequences of climate change on Earth. While the acceptance criteria for such a category are flexible at best, the role of policy-making and of New Zealand as a political actor and geographical setting to the global eco-catastrophe remain marginal features in such contemporary stories. Jeff Murray's 2019 novel entitled *Melt* crucially bridges fiction and public policy, in a move to put the Pacific, New Zealand and Antarctica at the forefront of climate change debates. As the near future sees Antarctica melting, the novel particularly focuses on the socio-political and infrastructural challenge that millions of climate change refugees will represent to wealthy and relatively spared nations, such as New Zealand. Correlated issues in sustainable management, economic inequality, intercultural relations and geopolitics are further evoked. In its attempt to alert New Zealand policy-makers and the general public to these long-term questions, *Melt* importantly invites reflection on the potentiality of narrative to inspire action taking. This article takes the form of an interdisciplinary discussion between Murray, a first-time novelist with a professional background in strategy policy, and literary and cultural studies scholar Jessica Maufort.

Keywords:

climate change fiction

climate migration

New Zealand public policy

Antarctica geopolitics
Pacific refugees
eco-catastrophe
social and environmental justice

Published in 2019, *Melt* is the debut novel by New Zealand writer Jeff Murray. In 2048, the world is preparing for an inevitable ecological collapse. While some opt for enclosed luxury living, hundreds of thousands of climate refugees flee to more temperate regions, such as New Zealand. Meanwhile, the three powerful nations in coalition – China, India and the United States – are in a race to settle on the melting continent of Antarctica, the new promised land. The narrative follows the tumultuous journey of Vailea (Vai) Shuster, from her endangered Pacific island called ‘Independence’, to New Zealand and Antarctica; from the overcrowded refugee slums of Auckland, to the elite mansions in unspoilt Otago and to Antarctica’s icy wilderness.

Most popular reading lists of environmental or climate change fiction (‘cli-fi’) do not feature works penned by New Zealand writers and set in that country. Finally finding a novel placing New Zealand at the centre of the global ecological turmoil, Jessica Maufort entered in dialogue with Murray to learn more about his motivations and reflections. To a researcher in the ecocritical and postcolonial fields, *Melt* surprises by its down-to-earth scenario and attention to the impact of climate change on the social make-up of human communities, whether well-off or impoverished. Murray’s professional career in strategy policy and urban growth accounts for this refreshingly pragmatic perspective. So, *Melt* also represents an encounter between the genre of fiction and policy-making, much like the following discussion spans different research disciplines from literature to economics. This article is based on email correspondence and a videoconference which took place in September 2020. Murray and Maufort explore how the climate crisis both implies cultural and representational issues, and necessitates urgent strategic planning at the level of New Zealand’s climate and migration management.

Narrative writing: Between fiction and public policy

Jessica: At first sight, *Melt* might appear as speculative fiction, yet many of its environmental, political, economic and social issues are already occurring. The novel seems particularly anchored in very realistic, practical and scientific research about population movements and governments' policies about them, emphasizing the lengthy bureaucratic process faced by migrants and the tactical economic plans of real estate and corporate developers. Is this focus part of your educational or professional background?

Jeff: Yes, I have a background in land and infrastructure planning to facilitate urban growth, and I have worked with Māori organizations and tribal forums on a number of occasions. I have a Master's degree in Resource Management and a second one in Land Economics. I've recently joined the government public housing agency, Kāinga Ora, as a Regional Director, but the views expressed in my novel are my own and decisions regarding climate change are made by the Board, not Regional Directors.

Jessica: Do you have Māori ancestry yourself? How do you identify?

Jeff: I identify as Pākehā as this best reflects my heritage and lived experience. I have some Māori ancestry but know little about that side of the family – my Dad's side. I think the term 'Pākehā' positively recognizes my heritage in England, Scotland, and Ireland as well as my Māori ancestry. It also encompasses the fact that my family have had no direct ancestral links to those countries for four generations. I've spent ten months in England, my parents visited there a few times later in their lives, and my grandparents and great-grandparents never visited the UK or Europe. So, I do not see myself as tied to those places in any way that significantly shapes me. Because, as a teenager, I felt no sense of being from the northern hemisphere, I tried to approach my Māori ancestry to see if I fitted there. My Dad could not see how either of us could do that: he had been raised in a community with strong Māori and non-Māori identities and was aware that we did not know our Māori side. And then, around the 1980s, the idea of being 'Pākehā' really emerged as something people talked a lot about – initially a bit negatively, amongst people of European ancestry, as the term was associated with being an 'outsider' or someone who does not belong. Eventually, it came to be seen as a descriptive for a wide range of people very much located in New Zealand but who do not have strong connections to any Māori iwi. So, I might be part of an emerging cultural group.

Jessica: Indeed. What also interests me is precisely the stark difference in our respective professional backgrounds. This interview does not simply discuss the story of *Melt*, but also hopefully opens up a trans-disciplinary dialogue on the delicate and urgent issues your novel highlights. As a literary and cultural studies researcher, I find it fascinating that you opted for the genre of fiction to convey your ideas. What motivated you to write a novel?

Jeff: I wrote the novel because I wanted to influence public policy. I was interested to see if I could adopt the format of fiction to advance public policy, specifically in the refugee and climate change fields. At the moment, New Zealand's climate focus is mostly internal, looking at issues in cattle, transport and trees. I wanted to raise debate on two external elements that I think will impact us hugely: the need to provide refuge to large numbers of people and the consequences of Antarctica melting. As part of this, I wanted to create a plausible scenario that readers could engage with, so I needed it to be fact-derived, but not hemmed in by facts.

As a type of storytelling grounded in fact, narrative is central to strategic planning. I have worked in strategy for most of my career. In transport and urban growth, strategy is about helping people think about the future, say, 30 years out. Proposals are plausible future scenarios rooted in fact and presented in narrative. So, although I had no background in fiction writing, I have had a long experience in narrative storytelling. That was really where I was coming from, trying to build a narrative in order to inspire an informed and grounded discussion. I tried to use the format of fiction combined with the techniques of policy narrative, which consist in extrapolating factually correct data out to a narrative about possible futures. Christopher David Jack et al. have recently illustrated how narrative can work as a tool to assist in policy development within the context of climate change (Jack et al. 2020: 3-5).

While I'm not against the role of experts and evidence – I continue to work in that space – they have not been able to sufficiently influence policy. Since 1992, I have worked at the interface of communities, urban growth and the environment, and in this time environmental damage and inequality have significantly worsened and climate change has marched on toward three degrees. We are living in a period in which macro-processes include species extinction, inequality and climate change and in which public policy is underpinned by the narrative of sustainability. However, in New Zealand, despite 30 years of sustainable water management, almost all waterways turn out more polluted (Ministry for the

Environment and Stats NZ 2020). So, in the midst of overtly rational and evidence-based efforts, we have achieved macro-outcomes no one wanted.

In the novel, much of the discussion about migration, climate change and Antarctica is fact-based. In tandem, I sought to provide a human journey that gave life and emotion to the crisis. I see us as essentially good people failing to achieve water and species abundance; likewise, my story is about ordinary people failing to step up on climate and its human impacts. Bad people do not drive the story: people who could have done better surround the protagonist Vai and fail her.

So, by choosing fiction, I wanted to see if another medium could prove more effective in influencing results. This created issues in terms of writing style, especially in light of the maxim in fiction: ‘show me, don’t tell me’. In policy, you get straight down to telling: you assume the reader you are seeking to influence has limited time and will only read the first page, unless you capture their attention. So, you tell, tell, tell! On occasions in the novel, Vai turns to the audience and says in effect: ‘Sorry reader, let’s just pause for a message from the author’. Then I jump out from behind her and have my say. Mostly, I intervene to discuss refuge for people displaced by climate change and access to Antarctica for the powerful.

I want New Zealanders to debate how we will respond to the massive climate refuge challenge. What stands out in graphic representations of the world under two or three degrees of change is New Zealand’s relative safety. Modelling of changes in the country (NIWA 2016) shows that, compared to equatorial and continental countries, we will enjoy a more benign climate under various scenarios (see Kelemen et al. 2009: 6). Much of our weather comes up from the cold, wet southern ocean, which moderates climate change relative to most parts of the world. New Zealand will be a relatively well-off place and people, particularly from the Pacific islands, will demand and need to find refuge here. But it will take decades to set in motion the appropriate infrastructure to take on such a large new population: they will need homes, education and jobs. The time to prepare is now. The first step is New Zealanders having a narrative that invites them to reflect on providing refuge. I hope Vai provides humanity for that discussion.

Another key policy outcome I was pursuing was to bring into New Zealanders’ view of climate change an understanding that the melting of a continent twice the size of Australia would impact the nature of our internal and external politics. There will be a scramble for the control of Antarctica and New Zealand is one of the best located countries to launch from. We will be drawn into that geopolitical contest and I tried to imagine how it might happen.¹ I

thought it would be lazy to paint a picture of all-out war. I wanted it more nuanced. What alliances might be formed? How might a small country like New Zealand play its hand?

Jessica: It is interesting that your ideal targeted readership is, as you say, the decision-makers in public policy, for this begs the question: will the *relevant* people read *Melt*? The question hints at the wider issue of the role and impact of the arts beyond their disciplinary confines. Are our political leaders and industry CEOs actually familiar with the wide array of cultural production that strive to represent some of the multi-faceted challenges entailed by climate change? Bearing this concern in mind, it does not necessarily follow, I argue, that any artistic or cultural project should seek to serve a societal purpose at the cost of aesthetic innovation. One thinks for instance of Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) and Roland Emmerich's *The Day after Tomorrow* (2004), two cinematic productions on climate change which marked my generation in their teenage years, but which attracted mixed responses from the scientific and cultural/artistic communities (Weik von Mossner 2012; Von Burg 2012; Revkin 2004; Murray and Heumann 2007; Steig 2007). Nevertheless, scholars generally agree that a balanced dialogue between the 'hard' sciences and the humanities is urgently needed around understanding social and ecological catastrophes, both undergoing and imminent.² With regard to Antarctica, the humanities have only recently joined the debates largely initiated by scientists, legal scholars and social sciences researchers, as testified by the only two existing collections: Peder Roberts et al. (eds) *Antarctica and the Humanities* (2016) and Elizabeth Leana and Jeffrey McGee (eds), *Anthropocene Antarctica: Perspectives from the Humanities, Law and Social Sciences* (2020). When preparing your novel, did you find inspiration in specific authors or works of fiction? What was the writing process like for you?

Jeff: I had never written fiction before I began the novel. I was learning by doing. After a professional reviewer showed me some fundamental mistakes in my draft, I took a six-week introduction to writing course. I then re-wrote the draft and decided to publish the novel, so long as I was not going to embarrass myself. I would have listed it up on Amazon and sold it for 50 cents a copy if that was all I could manage. In the end, I took it to Sir Bob Harvey, who has been involved in film and the arts more widely. I knew him through the family and work. He really liked it and endorsed it. He then took it to a friend of his, Sir Rob Fenwick, a well-known environmentalist and businessman who had also been a President of Antarctica New Zealand. These two endorsements gave me a lot of confidence, not that the novel was great from a literary point of view, but that it had something to say.

My writing process involved reading parts of particular books before I sat down to write. Different books for different processes. I read J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* when I felt I was over-writing and wanted to be more austere. I read Marilynne Robinson's *Lila*, my favourite novel, for inspiration. *The Quiet American* by Graham Greene helped me tell a story about geopolitical change. I read many other novels and I wrote the confrontation between Vai and her sponsor, Miriama, after seeing a very well-acted production of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. I loved it. But the play hangs on the edge of nonsense in its depiction of two angst-ridden women desperate to hold on to or find a man. I went home and decided to have a go at writing my confrontation scene in that manner: an overflow of emotion. But because I wanted to communicate a range of messages I kept going back to factual material: a significant influence was an article by James Hansen et al. (2016), which outlined how Antarctica could lose a great deal of its ice at only two degrees of change. David Day's *Antarctica: A Biography* was a good social and political guide.

I read a lot on migration and refugee policy as part of my research. It struck me that underlying this policy is a narrative of progress. It relies on the idea that the world and people's lives are generally improving. In that reasoning, the fact that people want to leave their country of birth is not viewed as a moral issue, but merely as a socio-economic question. When thinking along these lines, we can regard ourselves as liberal people and at the same time decline most applications for refuge. Climate change is destroying this narrative. Hundreds of millions of people are projected to need refuge, originating mainly from regions that have had little influence on climate degradation. The narrative of progress will not hold and how prosperous countries respond then becomes deeply moral.

Actually, I had a quote by Ernest Hemingway on the front of my draft until the end: 'The world breaks every one and afterward many are strong at the broken places. But those that will not break it kills. It kills the very good and the very gentle and the very brave impartially. If you are none of these you can be sure it will kill you too but there will be no special hurry' (Hemingway 1945: 219).

Jessica: That's an intriguing choice of quote. Some would read this as a sign of pessimism and would criticize dystopic views on our current and future state of affairs. Beyond suggesting a potential desire for 'pleasurable' reading material, such an objection to pessimism harks back to wider reflections on the various 'patterns of risk perception' (Heise 2008: 129; also see Hulme 2009). From a cultural perspective, the question of which narrative strategies or artistic genres could constitute an effective catalyst to changing our lifestyles,

both at individual and group levels, is very much at the heart of interdisciplinary debates spanning cognitive and social sciences, affect theory, media studies and aesthetics studies (Heise 2008; Hulme 2009; Mayer and Weik von Mossner 2014; Weik von Mossner 2017). From your experience in policy-making, do you have any thoughts on the role of risk perception to enact change? Was risk a factor you kept in mind when writing *Melt*?

Jeff: Yes, I think as a nation and globally we are badly managing risk. We are not taking rapid action. Instead, we are making our response conditional upon retaining our standard of living. This results in us eating the carbon budget very quickly, leaving no headroom for our kids or grandkids to make measured decisions. They will have their backs to the wall and be forced to take high risk actions, such as resorting to nuclear power or geo-engineering. So, it is inter-generational risk that is being mishandled. How is it that the current crop of adults are driving their kids and grandkids into a corner? How do we deserve to be remembered?

I think there is a real choice between a ‘conditional incrementalist’ response, in which our piecemeal response to climate change is conditioned on maintaining growth and consumption, and a ‘what-ever-it-takes’ response, whereby we take a very pro-active stance in order to drive the emissions curve down. The latter option gives headroom to the next generation; it is a risk management response. We are not doing that because we are not willing to sacrifice: not for our kids! Just before completing my novel, I read a good article by Enno Schröder and Servaas Storm (2018) on whether we should continue on that conditional incrementalist path and that influenced my reflections on risk.

Living on the edge: the Anthropocene, sustainability, abundance

Jessica: Because *Melt* broaches a wide range of subjects, the text can be approached from many critical positions, including post- or neo-colonial, environmental, social and ecological activism and Anthropocene literary studies. Through your characters, you seem to take issue with some ecological activist approaches and the concept of the ‘Anthropocene’ as denoting an age of full human control over nature.

Jeff: I think there is a lot of conceit and arrogance in that word. I do not think that it makes sense to say we are living in the Anthropocene. These are geological periods that cover millions of years. The period we are in now began in the 1840s and, to date, our impact on the

natural world has been only destructive. If a person walked into an art gallery and smashed it up, would we rename the gallery after that person?

Jessica: But not all human beings are responsible for environmental damage and climate change in equal measure...

Jeff: My image of the art gallery still stands. We are unable to step away from our own centrism, our anthropocentrism. More to the point, it is too early to say we have created a footprint that will be readable in millions of years. There might be a radioactive signature from us that lasts that long, but what else? I believe water and the lack of water will shape the world more than our activity. Sea level rise, flooding, drought, lack of drinking water – these things will engender massive changes in where we can live and in turn tip geopolitics on its head. The melting of Antarctica makes an enormous amount of ‘new’ land available, the rush to capture that land is derivative of the movement from ice to water. So, in my view we are moving into a water dominated period with humans having no legitimate claim to an Anthropocene – we are just minor players.

Jessica: Minor players, indeed. I myself find Joshua Schuster’s definition of this geological era as ‘a mix of human activity and passivity at planetary scale’ particularly relevant (2014: 165). This passivity is to be understood in the sense that, in the Anthropocene, human beings ‘must also be described as *being acted upon* by that same world on an ontological, rather than merely existential, level’ (Boes and Marshall 2014: 61, emphasis in original). As he considers ‘how to write the disaster,’ I agree with Schuster that the ‘Anthropocene’ at least offers us a ‘frame by which we consider the world made by us *and the world without us or beyond us* and what it means to be self-reflexive about both’ (2014: 165, my emphasis). Our own demise, as individuals and as a species, is a practical and representational challenge not to be overlooked. Impoverished communities at risk, such as that of your character Vai on a tuberculosis-ridden island threatened by rising waters, are made more acutely aware of this reality than privileged societies in ‘safer’ environments. In your opinion, would perhaps the notion of ‘Capitalocene’ – a capital-centred ‘way of organizing nature’ (Moore 2017: 606) – be more relevant to describe how some human cultures conceive of and interact with Earth?

Jeff: I am reminded of Thomas S. Kuhn’s work *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* describing a cyclical process by which a paradigm becomes dominant and drives the way we

think about things and then collapses under its own internal weaknesses. I believe we are standing in one of the macro-transition periods he describes and moving into a major new paradigm. If we respond adequately to climate change, species extinction and inequality, we will, as part of that process, move into a significantly different economy. If we do not respond adequately, we will collapse into a significantly different economy. I think people understand this and are searching for a new paradigm. We have not found one yet but the shape of it is about re-embracing the Earth, being more meaningfully global by viewing all people as 'inside the community' and having a sense of sufficient material wealth. In my opinion, the new way of doing things will be so different from the present that any debate as to whether it is still capitalism will be pure semantics. It will not be consumption-driven at the very least.

The post-1840 period was shaped by an embrace of consumption enabled by technology and science, along with advances in governance. We now know that we can generate enough wealth for everyone to live comfortably, but we have not developed the means to share fairly. Concomitantly, we find ourselves overwhelmed by climate and ecological disaster. I think these failings are serious enough to propel us forward into a new paradigm. For instance, the New Zealand government is re-establishing the role of the social contract with a broad focus on well-being. This is an early step in changing how we interact with the world. Since we work best in communities that work together, I think we are searching for a paradigm that relies on cooperation globally and an abundant ecology. I doubt that we will move fast enough, but we've definitely begun to move.

Jessica: The topics of abundance and scarcity recur throughout your narrative and are deployed variously according to the characters' backgrounds. In 2048, 'living in abundance', or living 'a full life' (Murray 2019: 250), is the aim of the young generation represented by Vai and Juan, whereas scarcity has defined the older generations and those currently inhabiting 'Third World' regions. This appears as an interesting reversed situation, given that the philosophy of an infinitely bountiful nature used to legitimize (or arguably still does so today) human cultures' unsustainable exploitation of natural resources, such as European settlers in the colonized 'New Worlds'.

Jeff: One of the key ideas in my novel was Abundance as a signifier of a positive future. Ultimately, the idea cannot succeed in *Melt* because the plot relies on climate change overwhelming us. The idea of abundance ends as a drunken chant in a pub. Putting aside the requirements of my plot, however, I think abundance could replace sustainability as the major

organizing principle for our relationship with each other and the natural world. Abundance is purposeful and sets a positive direction, whereas sustainability has been hollowed-out to the point it needs setting aside.

The 1987 Brundtland report placed sustainability at the centre of public policy, using the definition: ‘Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’ (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987: 8). In the intervening years, ‘sustainability’ has not been able to put us on a successful path because its definition does not lead us in any particular direction; what does it mean to ‘meet the needs of the present and future’? Sustainability needed an active agent to tell it what to do.

Coincidentally, from the late 1980s, sustainability became an organizing principle at the same time as public policy moved away from relying on a tacit social contract for overarching direction in favour of relying on market forces. The social contract was seen as too value-laden and dependent on the public sector knowing what was good for people. In contrast, market forces were presented as relatively value-free and not reliant on centralized wisdom. In the context of very limited government regulation, a market-led competition of ideas and competition for investment appeared as the best way to find an optimal allocation of resources in any situation. In my view, because of this accident of timing, markets became the active element that ‘told’ sustainability how to operate.

Specifically, the economic idea of marginalism, in the frame of free markets, was taken onboard to be this active agent. By marginalism I mean the point at which the marginal (or next) benefit equals the marginal cost of producing the benefit. Activating ‘sustainability’ with economic marginalism places us in a negative relationship to each other. We ask the question: how much can be taken before a collapse occurs? And then we try to live close to that marginal point of consumption. Free market thinking represents itself as Darwinian, testing options on the Serengeti of the market place where the best ones survive. The market, like evolution in nature, has no outcome in mind: whatever emerges is represented as inherently optimal. In this context, the marginal point of consumption is also represented as inherently optimal and not open to rational critique.

For example, it could be decided that a fishery is being sustainably managed if it is able to maintain an agreed variety of species. The various species can be consumed to the marginal point where it is estimated they will not go extinct. More consumption is expected to tip the resource into being unable to replicate itself, while less consumption reduces the utility of people who exploit the fishery. In this way, the ecosystem is managed to limp along,

always on the verge of collapse. I have no problem with marginalism per se – it’s just a tool – but its interaction with sustainability has reduced the latter to legitimizing ecosystems teetering on the edge. The focus of sustainability has been narrowed down to the marginal capacity of a system to replicate itself (for an illustration of this dynamic, see the survey of the snapper stock status emitted by the National Institute of Water and Atmospheric Research; NIWA 2012/2013).

Abundance needs a sound definition that overcomes the flaws of sustainability. I do not have a definition, but, if the task is to create a more equal society where people and the wider world flourish, then it is outcome, not process, oriented. The definition of that new paradigm would need to direct action to a world full of thriving, rather than surviving, ecosystems, with an equitable distribution of assets and wellbeing across the globe. It would not be preservationist or opposed to change; it would see extremes of wealth and poverty as unacceptable. It would take note of the fact that, left to itself, nature tends toward abundance. Importantly, it also requires humans to take an active, adult role in managing toward an agreed outcome, neither relying slavishly on the market nor childishly on central planning.

I see the world in a sense ‘growing up’ through the current immature period toward a responsible adulthood. Toby Ord’s *The Precipice* offers a great review of the idea that humanity can mature. My novel alludes to this process. Either we will find ways of living well with the planet or we will push past two degrees of climate change and be forced to make radical changes. These are the challenges of youth: do we make good choices before or after we’ve crashed the car? I do not think many of our leaders are growing up, but the world is learning to work together. We will leave our grandkids a period of great suffering but they will come out much better than we are.

New Zealand and climate migration

Jessica: Speaking of maturity, I would like to return to a major aspect of *Melt*, i.e. its concern with New Zealand’s responsibility towards migrants in general, and specifically Pacific islanders in the grip of climate change. When I was in Wellington in 2016, I remember seeing a banner some people had put out of their window which urged the government to welcome migrants and refugees in higher numbers.³ How do you see the situation now?

Jeff: I have the sense that many New Zealanders hope that the tough decisions associated with climate migration will be dealt with elsewhere and that, in any case, the journey to New Zealand will be too difficult for poor immigrants. We will be happy to take on wealthy people to prop up the economy, but not to fundamentally change the country. We will, nonetheless, have to welcome tens of thousands of Pacific island migrants, if not hundreds of thousands. This will shock New Zealanders and we will not be ready; but I think we will do it. Through my novel, I sought to stimulate debate on what we need to do to prepare, because preparing for change of this scale takes decades. We are essentially open to the fact that Pacific islanders are our cousins, so hosting them will be our first obligation. I agree that it is for these nations to debate how they will act upon climate change. Yet, two and half million people live in small Pacific nations and, if ten per cent of them need refuge with us, New Zealand had better get planning now.

While I acknowledge that we could keep climate change under two degrees, I do not believe we will. For me, this is a failure of policy. Climate scientists are very frank and factual in the advice they give. I do not see the same in climate policy. In my opinion, climate policy-making is adrift because it has not decided how to keep people onside: either by affirming that we can achieve the necessary change *and* retain a strong economy (a success without sacrifice approach), or by openly stating that we cannot succeed without radical and urgent change, irrespective of the economic impact. The messaging keeps switching between the two approaches. Storm's article on the dependence of the European Union's Green Deal on global financial markets articulates what I was worrying about: 'the European Commission itself is closing down all avenues for systemic change through tougher regulation, higher taxation and higher spending, as well as for an ambitious green macroeconomics and green industrial policies, which would enable achieving climate neutrality in a socially and economically inclusive manner' (Storm 2020: 27).

With this message-switching we run the risk of losing the public's confidence, as they could perceive expert advisors as inconsistent and therefore untrustworthy. A key element of New Zealand's success in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic was the direct relationship between science and the direction of policy and action. I think our COVID-19 response has been exemplary: almost all New Zealanders trusted and acted on the advice. Central to this was the lack of message-switching. Alongside this, there seems to be a strand of leadership whose strategy is to emphasize achievements as a means of keeping people committed. I think this is just confusing: celebrating every success gives us the (false) impression that we are beating back climate disaster, and then – although less frequently – a macro-message

announces that we are falling short. Again, during the COVID-19 crisis, New Zealanders received neither positive nor negative messaging; we received factual messaging. Climate policy needs to sort out its approach and then its messaging.

Returning to your question, I think New Zealand is refusing to address the external challenges caused by climate change. Our focus is internal and incremental. There is no discussion of access to Antarctica or the provision of refuge.

Jessica: It is as if the country is using the distance, its remoteness from other land masses to its advantage or as an excuse to withdraw unto itself and continue living as usual.

Jeff: Yes. There is a sort of tacit agreement that we should not talk about how Antarctica could significantly change and become a political contest and a land to exploit for its resources. It's as if the conditions for change could be created in the act of talking about it. So, we continue to refer to Antarctica 'as it is', namely through the constructed image of a remote, beautiful space for adventure with lots of ice and penguins.

(Re)forging geopolitical and inter-cultural dialogues

Jessica: In the narrative, New Zealand seeks an alliance with China in order to channel millions of climate change refugees, house them locally or relocate them to Antarctica. In this geopolitical reconfiguration, what does the 'Pacific Rim' mean to you, or perhaps to the protagonist Vai?

Jeff: One of the challenges with climate change is that it locks us into a path that we can only get off over hundreds of years. Once the carbon is in the atmosphere, it sits there and climate change rolls on even if we make sudden changes to emissions. I expect that around the middle of this century we will start making very pragmatic decisions about how to act. We will need large, well-organized and competent leadership. To emphasize the extent of pragmatism I think will emerge, I suggest, in *Melt*, an alliance between China, America and India providing that leadership. I made a deliberate effort not to take a view on the merits of any of this 'big three': a drowning person does not check on the politics of the hand that reaches out for them.

I am not sure how important the Pacific Rim will be as a driver of what we do. I think the opportunity to exploit Antarctica could lead to the situation I describe in *Melt*, whereby

most northern hemisphere countries are pushed out, while China, America and, to a lesser extent, India compete for influence amongst southern hemisphere countries. Because no one country will be dominant, there will be an alliance-building process. This will be tricky for New Zealand because we could benefit from all of the big countries. The Pacific nations will face the same challenge and I try to make this point by drawing a line of human descent in Vai's ancestry from China to Taiwan and out into the Pacific. And then the journey of some Polynesians to New Zealand. I place the journey to Antarctica as a continuation of this original migration south from China over centuries.

Jessica: In New Zealand, Vai becomes the protégé of Miriama Hunter, the head of a large property company planning for the housing of refugees in Otago and Antarctica. The two women differ in terms of their socio-economic backgrounds and, in the end, their respective plan of action. Their relationship – and how it tragically ends – is all the more ambiguous that the text implies Miriama is at least partly of Māori descent, which one would think would facilitate the women's mutual understanding on the basis of cultural kinship. Does this complex relationship say something about the Māori-Pasifika dialogue in the face of climate change?

Jeff: I have written Miriama as someone who is Māori, that is the culture she lives. Because I think we will fail to deal with climate change I needed the characters in the book to fail. Miriama's specific opportunity was to help Vai and her island community. So, one way or the other, the plot needed Miriama to fail.

However, I have worked for a Māori leadership forum, the Mana Whenua Kaitiaki Forum in Auckland, which has asked the government to prepare to take on Pasifika climate refugees if the time comes. For this reason, Māori leadership might provide the locus of debate on this topic. I am not sure whether such a dialogue really exists yet, but if or when it happens, it is likely that Māori will drive the country to do the right thing by Pasifika people at least. In New Zealand, we are not openly discussing whether we should prepare to take on-board Pasifika people seeking refuge from climate change. I believe this is because we hope they will not have to abandon their homes and we do not want to be seen as interfering in Pacific nations' decision-making processes. Still, there should be a frank acknowledgement of the risk that Pacific nations will be overwhelmed by climate change. Such a risk orientation could lead to much-needed active planning as to how New Zealand would address the

challenge. Not talking, within New Zealand, about this very concrete possibility disadvantages Pasifika people and advantages those with resources and wealth.

Jessica: Whether one agrees or not with the appropriateness of the term ‘postcolonial’ in today’s context, your novel at least seems in line with the argument that colonialism is not a phenomenon of the past. Where do you see that in your book and/or today’s New Zealand and Pacific islands?

Jeff: I agree; colonialism is not in the past. It remains with us in many forms, such as financial inequality. In my novel, I deal with two different issues: the question of a ‘classic’ re-colonization by a powerful country and the question of how liberal descendants of the European colonization might address mass migration in the context of climate change.

In *Melt*, because of New Zealand’s proximity to Antarctica, there is a sub-text of possible re-colonization, in the sense that one or more influential nations might simply take over in order to advance their access to that continent. But the country works hard to accommodate the pressures from these nations, without being captured by any one of them. There is no formal colonization.

Alongside this, I pose questions to people like me: If millions of people need to come to New Zealand, given we are one of the better off places, what will we do? And what will be the impact on the current power group? This huge population increase will perhaps shift the nature of the country’s cultural and power relationships. I see this as a challenge implied by migration and, in the novel, I leave it as an unresolved point of anxiety. This sits within my wider public policy interest: I want us to look at the scale and implications of climate migration and how we should prepare for that, not only from a physical infrastructure perspective but also in terms of cultural impact. I have seen the negative reactions within some European countries to immigration from places such as Syria. While these nations were arguably caught unprepared, in New Zealand we have time to think about our obligations and some of the choices that might arise if our response to climate change proves ineffective. For me, this failure will imply accepting mass immigration. Narratives, as part of our preparations, help us understand how this position can enhance our communities. *Melt* places this choice in front of the reader and then moves on, hopefully leaving them to perceive their responsibility and take their own view on it.

Settling on Antarctica

Jessica: The second half of the book is set in Antarctica, described by the settlement instigators as a Brave New World in the making. Have you been there yourself?

Jeff: No, I have not. I would like to go, but I was not writing about the place as it is. We have a narrative about Antarctica as a beautiful wild place; we also have one about one of our famous adventurers, mountaineer Edmund Hillary, who explored that continent and went to the South Pole as part of the 1955–1958 Commonwealth Trans-Antarctic Expedition. Through this figure, we have a sense of being part of the Heroic Era of Antarctic exploration. It builds into our narrative about simple, good and pragmatic people; Hillary was very humble, he drove a farm tractor quite a long way across the ice... We enjoy that kind of story, it reinforces things we like about ourselves.

I did not want to continue this narrative of Antarctica as a wild and remote place. I wanted to talk in detail about environmental transformation (such as the rats eating the birds), about the Chinese scientists driving around looking for a place to build a dam, and about the practical, day-to-day things involved with taking control of that land. There is no romance in that sense. At the same time, Vai travelled and suffered in ways similar to the explorers in the Heroic Age. I located her there. The question of whether she fails is left open.

Jessica: The character of Juan, a young, privileged Argentine man, and his friends position themselves as the Indigenous people of Antarctica because they were born on this southernmost continent. Yet, their land claim is completely ignored by the Chinese, American and New Zealand diplomats. Is this not a striking sign of inconsistency on the part of a country like New Zealand with a bicultural or multicultural history and politics?

Jeff: Argentina has been sending pregnant women to give birth on the continent as a way to validate its land claims. Does this make the children Indigenous? In my opinion, Indigenous people are both the First People and those who have been there long enough to be embedded culturally in the place. The first Polynesians who voyaged to Aotearoa New Zealand were not Indigenous to that land, in my view: they became Indigenous through evolving a relationship to their new home land. I brought this aspect into the story to emphasize human complexity. Juan is a type of person who exists. Yet, I wanted his claim to be open to ambiguity, so the reader might think more deeply about this fraught question. From my reading, I get the

impression that scientists working in Antarctica tend to set themselves as the people of the land, essentially claiming to be its guardians. Day reports how strange it was for the first European explorers not meeting any Indigenous people (Day 2013: 26). Again, my impression is that they wanted to claim the land, but there was no one to take it from. Apparently, some of them shot penguins as a way of... re-enacting conquest? They seemed to face a conundrum there.

Jessica: Exactly, but through these killings, they performed a violent act of environmental invasion and appropriation, for perhaps the real Indigenous inhabitants of Antarctica are the non-human life forms that make up its ecosystem. And to some degree, the visitors seemed to recognize that when junior officer Charles Poynter, during Edward Bransfield's 1819-1820 expedition, referred to the countless penguins as "amphibious Islanders" that "disputed our landing" (Day 2013: 26).⁴

Melt closes on a seemingly open-ending, with a wounded and renegade Vai setting up a fragile camp made of plastics on the side of a volcano in the middle of Antarctica's icy desert. The scene appears rather allegorical, although the reader is left to choose whether it celebrates the fighting spirit of Pacific people against the odds, or it offers us one last picture of those dispossessed and overlooked by the rich nations during climate change.

Jeff: I wanted to depict Vai as abandoned but not broken. I wanted the reader to see in stark terms the human impact of our actions on less powerful people. At the same time, several readings are possible: perhaps she could claim the land and her community might eventually uphold that claim. Vai was present in Antarctica, she was part of the settlement and her presence matters. She lives in a tent like the rest of her family – no matter how far she has travelled and how hard she has tried, she cannot escape the status imposed on her by others.

Jessica: Are you planning a sequel to *Melt*, or another novel entirely?

Jeff: I have ideas for another novel and if I were a better writer I would definitely write again. I've been toying with the idea of writing about New Zealand's tendency not to talk about things that have gone wrong. However, I am not convinced that fiction is a good vehicle for impacting public policy.

Jessica: By the time this article is published, the world has been fighting the COVID-19 pandemic for more than a year. I find that this health crisis interestingly puts your novel in perspective. Specifically, Vai's community in the story is overwhelmed, as they must fight both a tuberculosis outbreak and the ecological collapse of the island. This two-front battle weakens the community tremendously, to the point that they totally depend on external help for food and medical supply and on an island which you symbolically named 'Independence'. So, a domino effect is likely to be feared, whereby new or re-emerging health issues further limit the capacity of already vulnerable societies to respond to ecological challenges.

Also, as I watched COVID-19-related news pervade the media (at least in Europe), I am left wondering whether the pandemic will be the catalyst for us to take action, or whether it will serve as an excuse for postponing decisions about other pressing matters, such as climate change.

Jeff: Personally, it gives me confidence that we *can* move at pace and scale if we have to. The SARS-CoV-2 virus has highlighted the value of working together: the more coordinated the national response, the better the result. In New Zealand, we have seen an exemplary straight line between science, policy and action; in other countries we've seen the results of those lines breaking. New Zealand's success in controlling the spread of the virus provides an obvious lesson for how we tackle climate change from this point forward. As Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern put it, we must 'go hard, go early' (see Jamieson 2020).

In terms of social impact, the crisis has emphasized unity for us, and divisions in Trump's America. For me, climate change similarly gives us the opportunity to build a strong, deeper sense of unity. While maintaining diversity, we would hopefully perceive our shared humanity out of the necessity to step up and help each other. This dynamic of integration somehow is a positive effect of climate change. Divisions are also bound to emerge, so the processes of integration and disintegration are tightly entwined in climate change. It challenges us to better ourselves: shall we choose to go towards integration or disintegration? In that sense, climate change carries a constructive potential, if we can recognize it and make the most of it for productive outcomes.

Conclusion

Presented as an interdisciplinary conversation, this article has outlined the urgent questions Murray's novel foregrounds, while searching to stimulate reflection on what this narrative in itself represents. Echoing *Melt's* meander through environmental precarity, social/class disparities and institutional compromises, this dialogue highlights the myriad problems caused *and* reinforced by climate change. Local and global perspectives are inextricably linked, as Murray calls for New Zealand to lay the legal and material groundwork at home to welcome climate refugees. The coordinated action between scientists, policy makers and public relations in the country during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic provides hope for a similarly effective climate change management. This will require, Murray stresses, finding alternatives to the notion of progress underlying refugee policy and to market-dependent sustainability. *Melt* imagines how current socio-economic inequalities and public policy shortcomings interact in 2048 when the melting Antarctic continent appears – albeit at first – as a good solution to extreme climate migration. Yet, this settlement scheme only heightens decades of geopolitical tensions and re-enacts colonial dynamics at the levels of land claims, resources exploitation and identity-formation processes.

In this context of divides, we both concur on the necessity of multi-scalar collaborations: between various research disciplines, between these researchers and decision-making entities, as well as in between cultural communities. Granted this idealistic message contrasts with *Melt's* earnest lucidity and dystopic overtones. Some may even question whether *Melt* is a climate change novel. Is it an instance of 'social environmental' fiction? Is it yet another cautionary eco-tale? While these might be valid interpretations to an extent, typological debates should not (inadvertently) delay our pragmatic response to the eco-catastrophe. Perhaps only time will tell whether a novel can in fact influence the drafting and implementation of public policies which more realistically address the multi-faceted challenges lying ahead. All in all, that a strategic planner felt the urge to write a fictional, book-length narrative for us to imagine and start planning our survival at least signals that something is wrong in the state of New Zealand's and global politics' preparedness.

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¹ 2048 is commonly thought to be the ‘expiry’ date of the Protocol on Environmental Protection to the Antarctic Treaty. The ‘caveat’ in its ‘modification or amendment’ article (Article 25) makes it possible for the Antarctic Treaty Consultative Parties to ‘reject anti-mining regulation and start stripping Antarctica of its mineral resources’ in 2048, should that be their wish (Dodds 2018: n.pag.).

² Studies on our (ab)use of energy represent a fruitful collaboration between the sciences and the arts (e.g. LeMenager 2016; Wilson, Carlson, and Szeman 2017; Szeman and Boyer 2017). The political and pragmatic attention of ‘energy humanities’ to energy production, needs and distribution strengthens, I find, the cultural/literary debates around social *and* environmental justice issues.

³ Because of its unchanged 30-year-old ‘tiny [refugee] quota’, the country’s small refugee intake compared poorly at an international level and was the object of ‘remonstrations’ by European leaders in 2017 during PM Bill English’s visit in Brussels (Stephens 2017: n.pag.). Since 2013, Murdoch Stephens has been leading the ‘Doing Our Bit’ campaign calling for the Refugee Quota Programme to be doubled from 750 to 1,500 places per year. After a compromise of 1,000 places was decided in 2016, a Labour-led government announced in 2018 it would implement the increase to 1500 over the next three years (Anon. 2018).

⁴ Ben Maddison challenges the alleged irrelevance of ‘indigeneity [...] to understanding [Antarctic] history’ (2020: 137) by unearthing the presence of Indigenous personnel (e.g. Sami and Ainu), on whose traditional knowledge and technologies the European explorers’ survival depended (2020: 138-148). Official accounts omitted such ‘indigenous presence’ to create ‘white-supremacist’ and Eurocentric ‘representations of colonial exploration and expansion’ (2020: 137).