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English 494SI

17 October 2024

Rising Together: A Rhetorical Analysis

In recent years, the voices of frontline communities facing the immediate impacts of climate change have gained prominence, bringing deeply personal stories to the global conversation on environmental crisis. One particularly poignant work in this movement is the poem *Rise: From One Island to Another*, co-authored by climate activists Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner from the Marshall Islands and Aka Niviana from Greenland. Presented as a dialogue between two islands—one in the Pacific, the other in the Arctic—the poem was performed live at the United Nations Climate Summit, drawing attention to the profound and existential challenges that rising sea levels pose to coastal and island nations.

Jetñil-Kijiner and Niviana's potent words build a bridge over great distances, demonstrating to us that despite the remoteness of these island people, they are united by a shared threat: the battle for life. The poem is an appeal for international assistance and an homage to their threatened homelands. The poets draw on something universal by combining the tales of their islands: our common ties to history, family, and home. They transform what may appear to be political arguments or abstract data into something direct and tangible based on their people's experiences and lives. The poem confronts the harsh fact that these territories are in danger of vanishing under rising waters while evoking the beauty of their islands—locations rich in ancestry and cultural identity—through striking imagery. The poem's form highlights the unity of these disparate populations and emphasizes that no island country must confront this challenge alone. There is a defiant tone throughout as Jetñil-Kijiner and Niviana push back against any notion of victimhood. Instead, they present themselves and their communities as resilient fighters who refuse to be erased by climate change.

In this analysis, I will examine how *Rise: From One Island to Another* goes beyond just illustrating the effects of climate change by utilizing strong imagery, symbolic frameworks, and a

combative tone. These resources support the development of a sense of community and resilience in international communities. Combining these rhetorical devices, the poem invites the reader to acknowledge and support the efforts to save these islands, transforming what may otherwise be a tale of loss into hope and unity.

Evocative Imagery

In *Rise: From One Island to Another*, Jetñil-Kijiner and Niviana paint a vivid picture of the beauty and vulnerability of their respective homelands, drawing readers into the stunning, precarious worlds of island life. Their words bring to life the images of the land, sea, and sky and the cultural and ancestral ties that bind these communities to their islands. For instance, Jetñil-Kijiner's references to the "land of my ancestors, from atolls, sunken volcanoes—undersea descent of sleeping giants" (lines 1-4) create a vision of a place that is both idyllic and delicate, emphasizing the intimate relationship between the land and its inhabitants. Focusing on natural beauty in the face of impending destruction heightens the sense of loss, reminding the audience of what could be lost if climate change continues unchecked.

By contrasting images of stability and tranquility with those of increasing chaos, the imagery conveys a feeling of impending danger in addition to the area's natural beauty. Niviana's descriptions of the "melting ice? The hungry polar bears coming to our islands or the colossal icebergs hitting these waters with rage" (line 27) show Greenland's coastline to introduce a sense of environmental turbulence, hinting at the irreversible changes affecting her homeland. The poem emphasizes the conflict between the islands' natural life cycles and the destabilizing effects of climate change through these juxtapositions of peace and danger. The poets create a visual and emotional experience that turns climate change from an abstract problem into a visceral, lived reality by allowing readers to see, hear, and feel these environments through their eyes. By encouraging readers to adopt a more intimate, emotionally involved viewpoint on climate change, this sensory detail helps them develop empathy.

Moreover, the poem's imagery is descriptive and deeply symbolic, representing island communities' resilience and cultural continuity. When Jetñil-Kijiner describes, "With these shells I bring a story of long ago two sisters frozen in time on the island of Ujae, one magically turned into stone the

other who chose that life to be rooted by her sister's side," she imbues the ocean and the sand with a sense of belonging and identity. The representation of the sister physically rooted in the soil conveys a sense of stewardship and heritage, implying that the land is fundamental to these individuals. In this sense, the imagery represents the cultural legacy the poets are committed to preserving and goes beyond the aesthetic of island beauty. By tying these images to themes of tradition and resilience, Jetñil-Kijiner and Niviana convey that the destruction of these lands would mean more than a loss of territory—it would mean the erasure of histories, stories, and identities woven into the landscape over generations.

Through these rich visual and symbolic elements, the poem's imagery strengthens its message by fostering a powerful, personal connection between the reader and the islanders' plight. The vivid depictions of both the calm and tumultuous parts of island life encourage the audience to view these locations as more than far-off, alien places; they remind us of our common connection to the natural world. As a result, the visual acts as a call to action, urging readers to acknowledge their role in combating climate change to ensure these places' existence and preserve their cultural heritage.

Symbolic Structures

Rise: From One Island to Another has a symbolic structure that reflects the unity and connection between two physically separated island communities. Jetñil-Kijiner and Nivian highlight the common realities of climatic concerns beyond geographical distance by presenting the poem as a dialogue. A call-and-response rhythm is produced by this alternate arrangement, in which each poet acknowledges the difficulties her island faces while answering the other's remarks. This pattern emphasizes their voices and weaves them into a single narrative, reinforcing that the climate crisis unites communities across oceans. Through this symbolic exchange, the poets convey that their communities are not isolated in their fight against rising seas, even if vast distances physically separate them. Instead, they are part of a larger collective bound by everyday struggles and a shared sense of resilience.

The structure also serves as a metaphor for the "bridging" the poets hope to achieve between their islands and the rest of the world. Each poet speaks from her unique cultural and environmental perspective, and yet the dialogue itself represents an act of solidarity and connection. This structure

allegorically implies that cooperation, solidarity, and support from one another are necessary in the fight against climate change. It illustrates how, despite differences in their unique experiences, the voices of frontline communities are united in their desire to oppose the forces endangering their communities. Jetñil-Kijiner and Niviana encourage readers to view climate change as a problem that requires a coordinated, international response by framing the poem as a dialogue that draws them into this shared experience.

In this way, the symbolic structure of *Rise: From One Island to Another* enhances the message of solidarity and reinforces the broader theme of interconnectedness in the face of global threats. The dialogue form serves as a reminder that no community is genuinely isolated in its struggles; instead, all are part of an intricate web of resilience and defiance against forces beyond their control. This structure powerfully aligns with the poem's underlying call to action, urging global recognition and collaboration to combat climate change and protect the places, cultures, and identities at risk.

Tone of Defiance

In this piece, the poets adopt a tone of defiance that powerfully reinforces their message of resilience and resistance. Rather than allowing the looming threat of climate change to define their identities as victims, Jetñil-Kijiner and Niviana embrace an attitude of strength, insisting that their communities are neither passive nor defeated. This defiant tone comes through in lines like "Instead we will choose stone. We will choose to be rooted in this reef forever," which refuses the passive image of islanders as helpless in the face of rising seas. By declaring themselves rooted to their islands, the poets transform the poem into a declaration of empowerment, asserting the agency and determination of island communities. This defiance not only underscores the poets' commitment to survival but also inspires a sense of admiration and respect in the audience, encouraging a view of these communities as resilient rather than vulnerable.

The tone of defiance in the poem is also aimed at a broader audience, particularly policymakers and global leaders. Through assertive language, Jetñil-Kijiner and Niviana challenge those in power to confront the human impact of their decisions. Lines such as "From these islands we ask, we demand that

the world see beyond SUVs, ACs, their pre-packaged convenience, their oil-slicked dreams, beyond the belief that tomorrow will never happen" (line 82) directly address global leaders and policymakers using assertive language to challenge their indifference and demand accountability. This is a monument to these communities' unbreakable spirit and a warning. It declares that islanders will continue to rise, if not physically, then at least symbolically, in defiance of any efforts to ignore or eradicate their presence. Therefore, the defiant tone has two purposes: it serves as a source of inner strength for the communities of the poets and a direct challenge to those in charge of climate policy, reminding them of their duty to safeguard these vulnerable areas.

Through this tone, *Rise: From One Island to Another* transcends a narrative of fear or sorrow, positioning island communities as protagonists in the story of climate change, not merely as casualties. This tone galvanizes the poets and their audience, presenting a future shaped not by passivity but by action, unity, and resistance. The poem's defiance is a rallying cry, inspiring readers to respect and support these communities in their fight to preserve their homes and identities against forces beyond their control.

Conclusion:

The poets transform a profoundly personal story into a universal message of resilience, urging readers to recognize the human faces behind climate change statistics. By grounding the issue in the lived experiences of islanders, they make it impossible for the audience to ignore the urgent need for action and empathy. The poem goes beyond simply describing the impacts of climate change; it embodies a spirit of survival and interdependence that is vital in the global climate struggle. The symbolic dialogue between the poets mirrors the cooperation that is necessary across nations and cultures to address environmental issues. Their words resonate within their communities and extend outward, reaching audiences who may be far removed from these island nations yet are nonetheless implicated in the broader consequences of climate inaction. By structuring the poem as a conversation, Jetñil-Kijiner and Niviana invite all listeners to join this dialogue, fostering a sense of shared responsibility and connectiveness that challenges the notion of isolated, regional crises.

In presenting their communities as fighters rather than victims, the poets reminds us that resilience is as much a part of islander identity as the ocean itself. This defiance does not merely resist the idea of displacement; it asserts these cultures' and landscapes' value and dignity as integral parts of the world's heritage. Through this powerful rhetorical strategy, *Rise: From One Island to Another* becomes a testament to the strength of frontline communities and an urgent reminder that climate change is a shared crisis that demands collective action. Jetñil-Kijiner and Niviana's words echo as a call to solidarity, insisting that we must all rise together in the face of rising tides.

In *Rise: From One Island to Another*, Jetñil-Kijiner and Niviana wield words as tools for change, using imagery, structure, and tone to underscore the urgency of climate resilience. The poem transcends its role as a testament to loss; it becomes an emblem of shared strength and defiance. The poem reaches out to a global audience through its rhetorical depth, calling for awareness and action. As the poets rise together, they remind us that in the face of rising seas, we must rise—united and resilient.

Works Cited

Jetñil-Kijiner, Kathy, and Aka Niviâna. *Rise: From One Island to Another*. 350.org, <https://350.org/rise-from-one-island-to-another/>. Accessed 15 Nov. 2024.