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#### Recommended Citation

Schneck, Emma, "Spectacular Imaginations of the Sinking Island". Senior Theses, Trinity College, Hartford, CT 2020.

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**Fighting Against Indifferent Tides:**  
**Spectacular Imaginations of the Sinking Island**

A thesis submitted to  
the department of Political Science at Trinity College

By Emma I. Schneck '20  
Under the advisory of Professor Reo Matsuzaki

**Acknowledgements:**

I would like to express my immense gratitude for the department of Political Science for sponsoring my research and empowering me to explore my interests in ways I previously thought unimaginable. To my contacts in Sydney, Australia who shared with me their wisdom and expertise in climate activism. To Maria Tiimon, Jill Finanne, Joseph Sikulu, and Victoria Keener among others who continue to inspire me with their extraordinary strength, optimism, and commitment to climate justice reform.

I would like to thank Professors Carbonetti, Kamola, Flibbert, Nebulon, and Milmanda who helped me shape my thesis direction when it was nothing but a sea of incongruent ideas and interests. To A.P, Hunter, and Elisabed for sitting down and hashing through the roughest of my drafts. I would also like to appreciate Roza and Stella for being my emotional support throughout these years, and constant companions during late nights in the library. Thank you to my family, who both encourage and ground me.

Lastly, I would like to express a particular thank you to my advisor, Professor Reo Matsuzaki. Your genuine dedication to my work and growth is something I can never fully articulate, nor even begin to repay.

Land Acknowledgement: this thesis was written on the traditional lands of the Mohegan, Pequot, Niantic and Nipmuc people of Connecticut, the Kanaka Maōli of Hawai'i, and the Gadigal Aboriginal peoples of Australia. The author recognizes these groups as the original and rightful stewards of the land.

*For my father, who--even as waves eat away the coast of his island home--continues to deny the  
need for comprehensive climate action*

### **Glossary of Terms**

The Association of Small Island States (AOSIS)--an intergovernmental organization of low-lying and small island countries created in 1990

Small Island Developing States (SIDS)--UN working group composed of small island states from the Pacific, Caribbean, and African regions

Pacific Small Island States (PSIDS)--UN working group comprised of Small Island states in the Pacific. Exists as a subgroup within the SIDS group. Does not include Australia or New Zealand

Pacific Island Forum (PIF)--First working group made up of Pacific Island States established in 1971. Originally led by Australia and New Zealand

Pacific Territory Trust/ Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands--The 1947 UN Trusteeship that granted sovereign control of the Marshall Islands to the United States

United Nations Framework for the Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)--International environmental treaty started in 1992 within the United Nations.

## Introduction

So what are the legends  
 we tell ourselves today?  
 What songs are we throwing into the fire . . . what  
 are we burning?  
 And will future generations  
 recite these stories by heart, hand  
 over chest?

Maybe  
 In one legend  
 It'll start by saying

in the beginning  
 was water

-an excerpt of *Utilomar* by Kathy Jetñil-Kiljner

In 2014, Kiribati president Anote Tong purchased 20 square km on Vanua Levu, a Fijian island. Tong declared this land as the first settlement allotted for resettling i-Kiribati citizens who have had their island homes swallowed by the rising Pacific Sea. This bold move by President Tong sent a clear message to a world gridlocked by climate stalemates: “The purpose of buying that land is to send a very strong message to the international community which had not been responding to our calls for something to be done.”<sup>1</sup> Jarring and brash, the actions of the former president of Kiribati highlight a massive hole in international law--the lack of legal protection and recognition of those displaced by environmental forces. Though new social understandings

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<sup>1</sup> N.a. “Interview with kiribati president anote tong”. *Youtube*. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zeMI7\\_Lgrw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zeMI7_Lgrw). 2016

of the human effects of global climate change have become more understood and accepted in the past few years, there still have been no official changes to decades-old conventions regarding international asylum and refugee status. The current international refugee system fails to provide for those fleeing drastic environmental forces, which raises many questions regarding the survival of some of the world's most vulnerable individuals.

This lack of legal protections for environmental displacement has serious real world implications. Many individuals attempting to flee life-threatening conditions have only been met with legal red tape. In 2012, Ioane Teitiota, a Kiribati native, applied for asylum in New Zealand on the grounds that he was unable to grow food or find potable water in Kiribati. Teiota's island home of Tarawa--the capital of Kiribati--sits only 9 feet above ground at its tallest point; Teiota's personal home is separated from the ocean by a crumbling concrete sea wall. Teitiota applied for refugee status on the claim that climate change and coastal erosion posed an imminent and lethal threat to him and his family. In an online interview, Teitoita attests, "I am the same as those who are fleeing from war. I too am afraid of dying."<sup>2</sup> Though he applied for asylum in New Zealand--the country where his children were born--he was denied refugee status and was subsequently deported. The New Zealand government claimed that because Teitiota's case did not involve his political persecution based on the criteria outlined in the UNHCR definition (race, nationality, religion etc.), he could not claim international protection through refugee status. He has since appealed his case to international tribunals four times, only to be continuously denied asylum. Many researchers understand Teitota's case as the first would-be climate refugee; since his landmark 2015 case, there have been 11 other Pacific islanders who have similarly applied for asylum, only to be denied as well.

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<sup>2</sup> McDonald, Tim. "The man who would be the first climate change refugee." *BBC News*. 5 November 2015.

Though the term exists informally in lay-speech regarding climate-induced migration, there legally is no such thing as a ‘climate refugee.’<sup>3</sup> By the UNHCR definition, a refugee is someone who is fleeing persecution on the basis of race, religion, nationality, adherence to a particular social group, or political opinion.<sup>4</sup> The concept of “refugee” emerged to protect individuals fleeing political persecution, and the UNHCR did not set up any parameters for social, economic, or environmental reasons for fleeing a country.<sup>5</sup> Yet, despite international failure to provide an adequate framework for climate displaced peoples, these island advocates are not standing idle. To Pacific islanders, climate negotiations are not merely a matter of lip service and diplomatic parading, but rather the key to survival in multiple senses. The case of the Pacific islands is particularly grave due to their vulnerable and isolated geography. Peeking just a few meters above sea level, the topography of these islands has a substantial role in shaping their environmental interactions. Many of these nations lie atop semi-submerged atolls--small fragments of geographically “decaying” islands that usually feature an outer barrier reef and central lagoon.<sup>6</sup> The lives and cultures of Pacific islanders have centered around subsistence farming atop narrow strips of land and fishing in central lagoons and barrier reefs. Global sea level rise and coastal inundation specifically target island ways of life. While most modeling of global sea level rise depicts a uniform, constant rise due to melting glaciers and thermal expansion of water, global sea level rise is happening at varied rates. Changing ocean currents and topography make it so that South Pacific islands will feel the effects of global sea rise at a

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<sup>3</sup> McAdams, Jane, “Swimming against the tide.” *University of New South Wales*, 26 November 2010

<sup>4</sup> N.a, “United nations framework convention on climate change,” *United Nations*, 9 May 1992

<sup>5</sup> N.a, “United nations framework convention on climate change,” *United Nations*, 9 May 1992.

<sup>6</sup> N. a, NOAA Ocean Service Education, “The life of a coral atoll,” 24 November 2019.

more accelerated rate than other coastal areas worldwide.<sup>7</sup> The effects of this sea level rise is projected to make these nations largely uninhabitable by the mid-21st Century.<sup>8</sup>

The effects of climate change are not confined to the complete submersion of these low-lying atolls themselves. The multi-dimensional factors of climate change such as coastal inundation, ground-water contamination, and increased natural storm activity coincide to progressively render these nations inhospitable. Lack of access to clean drinking water has become a major problem for many villages in Kiribati and Tuvalu especially. Health issues are of main concern, as inadequate access to water has opened a Pandora's box of sanitation-related conditions and diseases. Outbreaks of dengue fever, siguatera poisoning, and measles have become increasingly common in the islands.<sup>9</sup> Children have reportedly developed skin rashes from groundwater contaminated by pollution and storm drainage. Currently, Kiribati has a higher child mortality rate than Bangladesh due in part to this lack of access to clean water.<sup>10</sup>

Along with this gradual degradation of these islands and its resources, increased storm activity has also caused major flooding and infrastructural damage in these nations. In 2015, Cyclone Pam brought severe weather to the Pacific islands. Hospitals flooded and winds swept sand and debris into patients' rooms, causing a complete evacuation to a nearby school.<sup>11</sup> One entire coastal village permanently sank in the storm, taking all but the steeple of a white wooden church beneath the waves. Cyclone Pam itself destroyed 96% of the food crops on Vanuatu and caused over \$500 billion in damage.<sup>12</sup> In Tuvalu, an entire island became temporarily submerged by sea swells which forced its population to seek refuge on neighboring islands. The effects of

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<sup>7</sup> N.a, NOAA Ocean Service Education. "The life of a coral atoll." Accessed online on November 24 2019.

<sup>8</sup> Fletcher, Chip. "As sea levels rise, tropical pacific islands face a perfect storm." *Yale Environment Press*. 2018.

<sup>9</sup> Ives, Mike, "A remote pacific nation, threatened by rising seas." *New York Times*. 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Ives, Mike, "A remote pacific nation, threatened by rising seas." *New York Times*. 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Ives, Mike, "A remote pacific nation, threatened by rising seas." *New York Times*. 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Ives, Mike, "A remote pacific nation, threatened by rising seas." *New York Times*. 2016.

climate change are not happening in some far-off future; islands are already starting to become inhabitable due to environmental degradation. As scientists project that storm activity will increase in severity and frequency, we must analyze how environmental will affect the socio-political survival of entire Pacific populations.

There is a significant danger that 22 island nations in the Pacific could be lost to the rising tide within the next century, and this prospect of entire landmasses disappearing raises unprecedented political questions. What happens to island nations that disappear? Are they still states? Are its people still citizens? Categorically, territory that lies beneath the ocean at high tide cannot be considered part of a 'defined territory'--if more land is lost to rising oceans, the Wesphalean definition of a sovereign nation would cease to apply to these islands. Likewise, governments rely on the existence of a defined territory and a permanent population over which to govern.<sup>13</sup> Typically, governments only lose land to illegitimate occupiers or seizures from other groups or states--can we then potentially view the rising ocean as a colonial or imperial presence? What about the responsibility of developed governments and industries whose massive carbon consumption have created conditions for sea level rise?

As the prospect of full climate adaptation strategies seem increasingly slim, the possibility of island-wide migration plans looms overhead. In an increasingly globalized world, we assume that these people would move to growing diasporas in distant, developed countries. Yet, there are no international legal mechanisms put in place to assist with the movement of people fleeing environmental degradation and destruction.<sup>14</sup> The UN definition of a refugee

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<sup>13</sup> Wannier, Gregory E., and Michael B. Gerrard, "Disappearing states: harnessing international law to preserve cultures and society." *Climate Change: International Law and Global Governance: Volume I: Legal Responses and Global Responsibility*, 2013.

<sup>14</sup> Wannier, Gregory E., and Michael B. Gerrard, "Disappearing states: harnessing international law to preserve cultures and society." *Climate Change: International Law and Global Governance: Volume I: Legal Responses and Global Responsibility*, 2013.

excludes those fleeing economic or environmental causes and solely relied upon its dated, Cold-War driven political interpretations of asylum. The inability of international law to accommodate for victims of environmental degradation creates an uncertainty in the legal and political fate of these island nations.

In this thesis, I will first analyze the consequences of the international human rights and refugee regime and examine its deliberate failure to provide adequate humanitarian relief to victims of climate change. By placing the contemporary issues of climate displacement into the historic context of the origins of the international refugee system, I will demonstrate how imperial legacies and power politics continue to deny ‘climate refugees’ agency in their quest for recognition and asylum. With this framework in mind, I will then explore how post-colonial, Pacific Small-Island Developing States have been so successful in advocating for *climate justice* reforms in a hegemonic world order that inherently prioritizes the interests of Western superpowers. Ultimately, this success has been brought about by an artistic and skillful harnessing of powerful media “spectacles” and frameworks that caught the attention of international audiences. The emotional performance of these spectacular narratives ruptured the stiff and stoic norms of UN debate and ultimately demanded change in an institution known for its apathy and inefficiency.

Through an examination of the origin of the UN refugee system as well as an analysis of the progress made within Committee of Party (COP) meetings, we can understand that Small Island Developing States have taken a significant role in shaping climate diplomacy. As an extension, we can use the Pacific islands as a case study of a broader analysis of the nexus between anti-colonialism and the rise of alternative climate change advocacy. As islanders rely on the structures and dynamics laid within the UN to advocate for their political and physical

survival, we must pay attention to the intersection between institutional and grassroots push towards adaptive climate change measures. These international coalitions serve as a final push for survival as waves lap upon shrinking shores and carry with them the culture, history, and identity of a people lost.

### **Institutional Status Quo in UN and the Cause of Its Origins**

Climate diplomacy as a discipline emerged in the early 1990s. Talks of greenhouse gas emissions and sustainable development initiatives spearheaded these conversations; however as climate change continues to become understood more as a nuanced and intricate issue, its international discourses and policy responses have likewise begun to evolve. One recent development in international climate discourses is the conceptualization of *climate-induced migration*. As the international community continues to see developing migratory flows of people displaced by climate change, it is becoming increasingly apparent that there is a fundamental lack of legal mechanisms for migrants fleeing environmental degradation. This ominous vacuum of legal parameters is amplified in the case of the Pacific islands; as rising sea levels threaten the physical existence of these “underdeveloped” states, policy-makers are forced to grapple with a series of existential questions regarding state sovereignty and migration as a humanitarian issue.

While the discipline of climate-induced migration is still emerging, migration based on environmental factors has existed throughout human civilization. People have historically migrated due to floods, droughts, and other environmental factors for millennia.<sup>15</sup> The concept of climate-induced migration is not new; climate migrants have only become a logistical “problem”

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<sup>15</sup> Carter, George. “Establishing a pacific voice in the climate change negotiations.” *The New Pacific Diplomacy*, ANU Press, 2015, pp. 205–220.

in the contemporary period due to the institutionalization of solidified state borders following the official end of colonialism and WWII. Along with this formalized system of state borders came the subsequent adoption of stringent international migration and asylum laws.<sup>16</sup> The institutionalized definition of asylum within the Refugee Convention of 1951 prioritized individuals fleeing political persecution from tyrannical governments. The adoption of such legal frameworks excludes the humanitarian protection of those fleeing from environmental causes, even though there have been ample cases displaying the need for a more encompassing migration policy. New scholarship on climate-based migration also highlights this legal gap and displays a fundamental need for institutional legal reform.

Though limited, much of the emerging literature on the study of climate-induced migration has focused on the massive movements of people fleeing environmental degradation in Sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, increased international attention on the larger issue of refugees following the 2015 European Refugee “Crisis” has led scholars and diplomats to also engage with the concept of “environmental migrant” as an informal category of displaced person.<sup>18</sup> This recognition of environmental migrants served as an informal attempt to recognize these individuals--primarily within domestic law--and bring attention to internal flows of people, especially those who move to urban areas.

While this literature can supplement our understanding of the political ramifications of Pacific movements, it cannot fully prescribe any sort of policy model for the Pacific islands. The cases of Sub-Saharan Africa and the Pacific islands differ in one key respect: while much of the

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<sup>16</sup> In my thesis, I examine theory and literature behind understanding the UN human rights regime as a neocolonial extension of empire. I also engage with theory regarding the creation of institutionalized state borders, however for the scope of this paper, I have chosen to omit this research simply due to time constraints at the moment.

<sup>17</sup> White, Gregory. “Climate change and migration: security and borders in a warming world.” *Oxford University Press*. 2011.

<sup>18</sup> White, Gregory. “Climate change and migration: security and borders in a warming world.” *Oxford University Press*. 2011.

discussion surrounding Sub-Saharan Africa centers around the eventual return of migrants to their home countries, the potential physical erasure of Pacific islands negates any possibility of refoulement. Once climate change takes full force in the islands, there can be no possibility for return. The permanence of the Pacific island case study poses a particularly ominous threat to the current international refugee law, which regards asylum as both political and temporary.<sup>19</sup> In order to create a more equitable humanitarian system of international climate-based migration, there must be a significant alteration of our existing migration mindset.

In response to the current lack of legal protection for migrants and asylum-seekers, many climate advocates view amending established refugee law as a valid and productive means to deal with climate change.<sup>20</sup> A variety of actors have called for a new international treaty on climate change displacement, or a Protocol to the Refugee Convention or the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC),<sup>21</sup> to create a new class of refugee-like protected persons. In 2006, the Maldives proposed amending the 1951 Refugee Convention to extend the definition of a ‘refugee’ in article 1A(2) to include ‘climate refugees.’ Again in December 2009, advocates from the Maldives argued during discussions leading up to the Copenhagen Climate Convention that the convention on refugees could be revised to protect people facing environmental issues. While these particular pushes for recognition have come from nation states like the Maldives, non-state actors have also begun to advocate for a change to this convention. In the same year, a certain environmental justice organization petitioned the UNFCCC “to ensure social, cultural and economic rehabilitation of ‘climate refugees’ through recognizing them as ‘Universal Natural Persons.’”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> N.a, “Convention on the status of the refugee.” *United Nations*. 1951.

<sup>20</sup> N.a, “Convention on the status of the refugee.” *United Nations*. 1951.

<sup>21</sup> N.a, “Convention on the status of the refugee.” *United Nations*. 1951.

<sup>22</sup> N.a, “Convention on the status of the refugee.” *United Nations*. 1951.

However, while there is ample support for the adoption of a new, encompassing refugee convention, there is also valid hesitation from some island advocates. Many of these advocates are fearful that using an official refugee label to describe their situation connotes victimhood, passivity, and a lack of agency. In Tuvalu and Kiribati refugees are viewed as people waiting helplessly in camps, relying on handouts, with no prospects for the future. To be a refugee, in their eyes, is to lack dignity.<sup>23</sup> This outlook, though rather bleak and mistrusting, relies on the power of existing prolific rhetoric and discourses surrounding international climate change policy.<sup>24</sup> Though many Pacific advocates argue that migration--as the final means of survival for these island peoples--amplifies the interests and voices of small island states, others argue that it inhibits the creation of more transformative multilateral climate change *mitigation* coalitions. In their eyes, our own international focus on migration and displacement limits our understanding of island agency and guides our perception of the role of Pacific delegations.<sup>25</sup> This fear of victimhood relates directly with the hegemonic understanding of climate refugees as something that affects Global North countries, rather than a distinction that provides necessary humanitarian assistance to dignified individuals. It also shifts the focus away from potential avenues of climate change adaptation--a key component of wider climate justice demands.

While there currently exists a wide gap in international protective mechanisms for climate refugees, new discursive change in the UNFCCC Committee of Parties raises questions as to the status of climate-based movements. In the 2015 Paris Accord negotiations, nation-states recognized the existence of climate-induced migrants and displaced peoples. In the same breath,

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<sup>23</sup> Shigematsu, Setsu and. Camacho, Keith, "Militarized currents: toward a decolonized future in asia and the pacific," *University of Minnesota Press*, 2010.

<sup>24</sup> Kelman, I. "Hearing local voices from small island developing states for climate change," *Local Environment*, 15, 605-619, 2010.

<sup>25</sup> Dolla, Simran, "International legal protection for climate refugees," *Journal of Sustainable Laws and Policy*. October 2010.

the Accords put forth a movement towards the adoption of a “Climate Change Displacement Facility” in the near future. The Accords then go on to identify the case of the “Small Pacific Island States” as especially vulnerable to international movements and migration. Though these particular examples exist only in a rhetorical sense, there is something to be said on the power of this recognition in international climate diplomacy. This recognition raises a few particular questions, such as *who* put these particular phrases in the Accords and most importantly, *how*?

Stunts like the President of Kiribati’s purchase of Fijian land call attention to the fatalistic plight of the Pacific islands. Though the literature on the subject is by all means still “emerging,” a global understanding of the plight of environmentally-displaced people has increased in the past few years. As a direct result of these media spectacles, Pacific islanders have become the political poster-child for climate refugees worldwide. As stark images of semi-submerged palm trees and canoe-ridden asylum seekers occupy the minds of an increasingly climate-conscious public, we must examine the process of *how* we got to discussing these cases altogether.

### **Western Interpretations: Climate Refugees as Security Threats**

The international migration and asylum process has been entirely shaped by Global North countries. Because of the heavy autonomy and control these nations have over refugee processing, much of the discourse on the asylum process itself has been focused on how migration affects receiving nations. In the Global North, portrayals of migrants as nuisances have come to the forefront of international discussions and shape the way that these nations interact with refugees--especially informal ones. Receiving nations dictate the status of asylum seekers globally and ultimately determine the placement of displaced peoples. As the self-appointed

puppet-masters of humanitarian movement, these nations can decide how many refugees they are willing to accept, as well as the sex, nationality, and religion of incoming asylum seekers.

Inherently, the status of these refugees is contingent upon global recognition of the conflict in which they flee; if disasters do not gain the undivided attention of receiving countries, these nations will have no political incentive to house them.

As a result of this political definition of asylum, many have critiqued the United Nations refugee program as an inherently biased system that *prioritizes state-centric policies* over humanitarian need. This is important to understand when we examine the legal gap regarding individuals fleeing climate change. While the concept of environmental displacement has been known for quite some time, the political reluctance of Western states to adopt “climate refugees” into their humanitarian agenda is evident of this biased power dynamic in the UN. The inability of nation states to provide for environmental migrants is inherently rooted in Western interpretation of climate refugees as helpless, dependent individuals. By looking into the discourses surrounding climate-induced migration, we can begin to understand what the adoption of a justice-oriented “climate refugee” definition would counter.

In contemporary discussions on climate change migration, Pacific islanders have been portrayed as the victims. In a vast rising sea, helplessly stationary upon shrinking atolls, these individuals have no choice but to appeal to the benevolence of developed world leaders who hold their future in their policy-writing-pens. Migration is seen not only as inevitable, but most importantly as one-sided; climate-induced migration is something that *affects* the leaders of the Global North, and is something that they alone can solve. As the UNFCCC outlines, member countries “recognize the need for developed countries to take immediate action in a flexible

manner on the basis of clear priorities, as a first step towards comprehensive response strategies at the global level... to deal with the culminating greenhouse effect.”<sup>26</sup>

Current climate change discourse has been focused on how the West will adapt to biblical floods of migrants.<sup>27</sup> As border crossings increase and receiving states begin to feel the effects of increased migration, developed countries have co-opted the discourse on climate-induced migration to supplement a more Western-oriented framework. As a result, the migratory response to climate change has often been cast as a securitized issue that primarily concerns receiving states. Refugees and migrants are inherent security risks to developed nations, and receiving countries should take considerable caution when deciding if and how they are to incorporate migrants. This approach prioritizes the security of Global North countries over the survival of small island states and as a result shifts global attention away from the humanitarian aspect of climate change. Besides denying climate refugees access to humanitarian support, “these frames also undermine the desire of Small Island Developing State communities to be seen as proactive, self-determining, and active agents of change.”<sup>28</sup>

### **Rise of SDIS in the UN and the Proliferation of Advocacy Groups**

Pacific small island states have made considerable headway in their fight for a more righteous climate platform. Through coalitions between institutional working groups in the UN and local media organizations, small island nations in the Pacific have made international discursive change regarding climate-based migration, and have effectively displayed their

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<sup>26</sup> Simonelli, Andrea C, “Governing climate induced migration and displacement IGO expansion and global policy implications,” *International Political Economy Series*, 2016.

<sup>27</sup> Simonelli, Andrea C, “Governing climate induced migration and displacement IGO expansion and global policy implications,” *International Political Economy Series*, 2016.

<sup>28</sup> Dreher, A. and Voyer, K, “Self-determination in the Pacific,” *University of Hawaii Press*, 2014.

agency as change-making actors. By noting the disproportionate involvement of these small states and their collective effect on the outcome of these conventions, we can understand how the international adoption of the phrase “climate refugees” signifies a *growing strength of small island states*. Through unconventional means--namely the coalition between proactive media outlets and institutional diplomatic strategies--small Pacific island states have effectively turned heads to notice the plight of their “sinking” homes. We can document the discursive success of island activists through an examination of how island-built coalitions advanced their agenda over the years within the UNFCCC--an institution the Pacific islanders themselves moved to create.

Due to the particularly vulnerable positioning of their island homes, Pacific activists have an important role in advocating for climate justice reform within the United Nations. Through the creation of different working groups within the UN (such as the AOSIS, SIDS, and Pacific Island Forum groups), Pacific island nations have created a significant regional coalition focused on climate justice reforms and reparations. The mentality behind this coalition formation is that while these nations individually have little power in terms of negotiation, together they can call attention to regional issues. Coalition building among states--especially among small developing states with shared colonial history--has been a rather effective mobilizing tool in international spheres.<sup>29</sup>

As relatively young states, many of these nations only gained independence from colonial powers following World War II and the subsequent dismantling of wartime empires in the Pacific. However, despite apparent efforts to liberate colonized nations worldwide, many of the small island nations in the Pacific were also subject to lasting infringements of sovereignty. Notably, the Pacific Territory Trust was a UN ruling that allowed the United States to legally and

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<sup>29</sup> N.a, "The Pacific", *UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA)*, 26 January 2014.

politically control the Marshall Islands and other Micronesian communities through the framework of the UN. While on paper, many Pacific nations were categorically “independent,” the specter of imperial legacy persisted through the region and inhibited local autonomous growth. As a result, Pacific island nations looked to regional multilateralism as a means to nurture their independent development and political agendas. The basis of all Pacific diplomacy was borne out of the postcolonial strife for more autonomous and independent agency-building by Pacific island nations.<sup>30</sup>

### *A New, Pacific Diplomacy*

The birth of a new “Pacific Diplomacy” was conceptualized around the desire to forge a postcolonial diplomatic system in Oceania.<sup>31</sup> Pacific diplomacy refers to the diplomatic endeavors pursued by Pacific states in global forums or international arenas which recognize and interact with the Pacific bloc.<sup>32</sup> In order to bring about this new wave of diplomacy, Pacific leaders forged an imagined community in the region through strategic coalition building.<sup>33</sup> Founded in 1971, The Pacific Island Forum (PIF) was the first major institutionalized display of Pacific multilateralism which demanded attention on behalf of its small island member states. The Pacific Island Forum functioned as a forum for island nations to coalesce and advocate for certain interests within the UN. In the 1980s, PIF member states brought the French government

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<sup>30</sup> Tarte, Sandra, and Fry, Greg, "The ‘new pacific diplomacy’: an introduction," In *Understanding Oceania: Celebrating the University of the South Pacific and Its Collaboration with The Australian National University*, 361-80. 2019.

<sup>31</sup>Tarte, Sandra, and Fry, Greg, "The ‘new pacific diplomacy’: an introduction," In *Understanding Oceania: Celebrating the University of the South Pacific and Its Collaboration with The Australian National University*, 361-80. 2019.

<sup>32</sup>Tarte, Sandra, and Fry, Greg, "The ‘new pacific diplomacy’: an introduction," In *Understanding Oceania: Celebrating the University of the South Pacific and Its Collaboration with The Australian National University*, 361-80. 2019.

<sup>33</sup> Anderson, Benedict, “Imagined communities,” *The Nation*. 1986.

to public scrutiny in the UN Decolonization Committee over their maintained possession of New Caledonia. One common occurrence in Pacific agendas is an undying commitment to regional interests and island solidarity.<sup>34</sup>

While the PIF was primarily intended to voice the concerns of marginalized small island states, the incorporation of regional powerhouses Australia and New Zealand effectively overpowered the forum and marginalized the interests and voices of many smaller PIF countries.<sup>35</sup> While the issue of climate change is inherently personal and critical to Pacific island nations, many attempts to shape climate change agreements within the PIF have clashed with the economic interests of developed industrial nations like Australia and New Zealand. Australia has been one of the most reluctant nations to adopt greenhouse gas emission initiatives globally, and has been internationally reprimanded for its draconian asylum and migration laws.<sup>36</sup> While most PIF countries share common goals regarding climate change policy, New Zealand and Australia do not necessarily share these values. Many Pacific diplomats liken the position of New Zealand and Australia in the PIF to being in a support group with some of your staunchest adversaries--utterly unproductive and downright discouraging.

In addition to their excessive mic-hogging, New Zealand and Australia have also used the PIF to advance aggressive diplomatic agendas against its fellow committee members. In 2009, Australia spearheaded the move to suspend Fiji from PIF negotiations due to Fiji's refusal to hold democratic elections.<sup>37</sup> Fiji has long been regarded as Australia's "problem-child" in the region, given their willingness to call out the Australian government on their repeated instances

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<sup>34</sup> Tarte, Sandra, and Fry, Greg, "The 'new pacific diplomacy': an introduction," In *Understanding Oceania: Celebrating the University of the South Pacific and Its Collaboration with The Australian National University*, 361-80. 2019.

<sup>35</sup>Manoa, Fulori, "The new pacific diplomacy at the United Nations: The Rise of the PSIDS," *The New Pacific Diplomacy*, 2015.

<sup>36</sup> McAdams, Jan., "Why refugees are legal and australia's policies are not." *ANU Press*. 2014.

<sup>37</sup>N.a, "Dr Sikua on Fiji's suspension from PIF." *Solomon Times*. 6 May 2009.

of climate inaction.<sup>38</sup> Many looked at this expulsion as an abuse of Australia's massive power in the PIF and a political co-option of the group's objectives. Rendered bitter by this move, Fiji vowed on multiple occasions that they would never return to the forum so long as Australia and New Zealand occupied their negotiation seats (Fiji did, however, return to the PIF in 2014 despite the continued participation of their Western adversaries).<sup>39</sup> After this attack, many small island nations came to Fiji's defense and advocated for the reincorporation of the state into the forum. This move is testament to the ideological sense of community and connection that the Pacific islands have forged among themselves.

Island solidarity in the Pacific has manifested itself into this "ride or die" mentality that focused its efforts on fostering group inclusion and dynamics. Because of the existing power imbalance in their own club and in order to secure Fiji's inclusion, the Pacific island states moved to kick out their Western neighbors. Thus in 1979, the Pacific Small Island States (PSIDS) group--which excluded Australia and New Zealand--was created to function as a new outlet for small island states to discuss their strategic interests. These UN groupings are where most of the UN Pacific voting gets done--the small nature of the Pacific delegations make it more productive to shape regional voting strategies and interests.

Another move to shape regional interests and cohesion came about during the Malé Declaration on Global Warming and Sea Level Rise in 1989. This convention took place in the Maldives--a small island nation located in the Indian Ocean. In Malé, 30 island nations formed the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS): an action group whose lobbying power brought about the United Nations Framework for the Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).<sup>40</sup> The

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<sup>38</sup>N.a, "Dr Sikua on Fiji's suspension from PIF." *Solomon Times*. 6 May 2009.

<sup>39</sup>N.a, "Fiji's suspension from pacific islands forum is lifted." *Radio New Zealand*. 24 October 2014.

<sup>40</sup> N.a, "Introduction to Land Use | UNFCCC," *UNFCCC*, November 3, 2019,

UNFCCC is the main diplomatic body for drafting climate conventions and updates to international agreements. This is the UN framework which adopted the Kyoto Protocol in 1997 and the Paris Climate Accords in 2015, both of which continue to be the most substantial international climate accords ever conceived.<sup>41</sup>

AOSIS also played a major role in shaping climate change doctrine by drafting the first text of the Kyoto Protocol, which was the first binding climate change agreement that held countries liable for their global carbon emissions. The Kyoto Protocol is still regarded as one of the most influential climate change documents and paved the way for the Paris Accords of 2015. During Paris, AOSIS helped the UN integrate the Migration, Environment and Climate Change Division into its International Organization of Migration (IOM) offices with the intent to “address the migration, environment and climate nexus.”<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, following the Kyoto Protocol, AOSIS asked the Human Rights Council to take up the question of climate change, arguing that climate change violence and adaptation need to be understood in terms of their ramification on international human rights. Subsequently, eighty-eight UN member states endorsed the council’s recommendation that human rights expert bodies become involved in the United Nations climate change negotiations.<sup>43</sup>

Through their advocacy, small island nations have strategically and artistically attracted international attention to their plight. When it comes to climate advocacy in the United Nations, small island states like Fiji, Kiribati, and Tuvalu have made considerable “noise” in these

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<sup>41</sup> Every year or so, the “COP” member states gather to create and amend existing doctrine and add additional agreements to the original UNFCCC framework. “COP” refers to the “Convention of Parties,” or the updated accords; the conventions usually take the name of the city where they were signed and the sequential number of the agreement.

<sup>42</sup> Carter, George, “Establishing a pacific voice in the climate change negotiations.” *The New Pacific Diplomacy*, ANU Press, pp. 205–220, 2015

<sup>43</sup> Sweet, William, “Climate diplomacy from rio to paris,” *Yale University Press*, 2016, Pg. 126

forums. As William Sweet notes, “Like dying patients who get a lot of attention even though there may be nothing that anybody can do to save them, AOSIS nations are listened to when they speak up at international negotiations.”<sup>44</sup> This attention has manifested itself in the adoption of certain foci in international negotiations within UNFCCC, and lead to discursive change within the UN Framework. AOSIS has exerted a largely positive influence on climate change negotiations, despite their meager size. These islands lobbied hard for commitments going beyond greenhouse gas reduction, and influenced the adoption of migration-specific language in Paris.<sup>45</sup> Though to an observer the swirl of acronyms and UN working groups names may read like a bowl of alphabet soup, the act of solidifying specific, purposeful state-based coalitions signifies a growing ideational strength of Pacific island states internationally.

### **Changing the Discourse, Changing the Status Quo**

The push for recognition of climate refugees has not been solely left to institutional actors in the UN; rather the most notable push for change has been led by non-governmental actors. NGOs and Pacific island civil groups have made significant headway in framing island agendas and representations. Much of NGO work on the subject has been focused on media representation and outreach programming, and alternative island-based media has played a few significant roles in broader climate change strategies. Firstly, media helps define the international climate initiatives of Pacific island states in their broader political agendas. Secondly, media initiatives have prompted large international powers to act on behalf of smaller states, and have ultimately aided in shaping political change.

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<sup>44</sup> Sweet, William, “Climate diplomacy from rio to paris,” *Yale University Press*, 2016..

<sup>45</sup> Sweet, William, “Climate diplomacy from rio to paris,” *Yale University Press*, 2016.

When it comes to issues involving climate, Sweet attests that an “informed public is the best single guarantor of sound public policy, especially environmental policy.”<sup>46</sup> Media outlets are intrinsically linked to shaping public opinion and action when it comes to dealing with climate change, since much of its importance is derived from international media perception.<sup>47</sup> In climate change negotiations, media takes a prominent role in shaping what is to be adopted into each accord or convention, which has a significant effect on the outcome of the accords themselves. Pacific-driven media indeed made its way into shaping the agendas for both the Kyoto and Rio climate conferences, thus demonstrating the success of Pacific islanders in using alternative media as a way to supplement their smaller diplomatic presence in the UN. The 2009 UNFCCC meeting (COP 15) was groundbreaking in this regard--its direct incorporation of NGOs and media agencies into the diplomatic process was instrumental in creating a new, transcendental multilateralism.

In response to the perception of island nations as helpless, somber examples of climate change, Pacific media agencies have both rejected and reimagined this narrative. Advocates involved with the Pacific Calling Partnership--an Australian-based NGO focused on promoting Pacific voices--asked for “respect of the right to exist,” arguing that Kiribati and i-Kiribati are more than simply “proof” of climate change for a skeptical world.<sup>48</sup> Members of these alternative outlets attest that Pacific islanders are actively fighting the effects of climate change while simultaneously fighting to be portrayed as human beings with dignity and dreams for the

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<sup>46</sup> Sweet, William, “Climate diplomacy from rio to paris,” *Yale University Press*. 2016.

<sup>47</sup>Väliveronen, E, “Popularisers, interpreters, advocates, managers and critics: Framing science and scientists in the media.” *Nordicom Review*, 2, 39–47. 2001.

<sup>48</sup> Simonelli, Andrea C, “Governing climate induced migration and displacement IGO expansion and global policy implications,” *International Political Economy Series*, 2016.

future.<sup>49</sup> One of the broader missions for alternative media outlets is challenging the notion that climate change action has to come from Western powers. This framing is challenged by the adoption of a climate-justice oriented lens that prioritizes grassroots driven mitigation tactics over infantilizing Western-driven climate policy. Just as other facets in the larger quest towards climate survival, the success of climate justice is reliant on global media acceptance and the incorporation of its ideals among international policy-makers.

### **Slow Violence and Climate Justice**

Before attempting to abridge the nuanced, intricate movement that is climate justice, we first need to understand the context in which it emerged. “Slow violence”--as political scientist Rob Nixon describes--is a term used to refer to a series of long, structural violence that many marginalized communities face as the result of serious geo-political, social, and environmental inequalities. These instances of slow violence can only be understood in conjunction with both social and ecological forms of oppression, as well as a comprehensive understanding of the legacies of imperial histories. Environmental degradation has long been exported to poorer nations through channels of geo-political exploitation and imperial power. Slow violence is both a product of imperialism, structural inequality and capitalist expansion as a whole.

Scholars of slow violence often note that the expansion of Western capitalism has committed an inordinate amount of violence against marginalized and indigenous communities. As Joan Martinez-Alier argues, “The globalizing scale of the contemporary capitalist world economy means we are seeing more instances of resource extraction conflicts in poor or indigenous communities brought into the front line of contests about the values of environmental

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<sup>49</sup> Simonelli, Andrea C “Governing Climate Induced Migration and Displacement IGO Expansion and Global Policy Implications,” *International Political Economy Series*, 2016.

resources and services.”<sup>50</sup> While these instances of violence that target disenfranchised populations are just as grave as forms of more direct violence and human rights abuses, they are often overlooked in our human rights discussions. These violences are felt drastically by those who suffer from environmental imperialism, yet they often are not as examined or discussed as “traditional” understandings of violence.

Climate justice is the comprehensive movement that emerged to address the nuanced foundations of slow, socio-environmental violence. Climate justice refers to claims for greater equality in both the distribution of climate change impacts, and negotiation power between actors. A political framework for climate justice would argue for an equal and equitable platform for developing countries to voice their concerns and argue for substantial climate-based reforms.<sup>51</sup> Part of the climate justice approach in the Pacific islands thus incorporates not just an emphasis on migration, but also on community-driven action for climate *mitigation*. This movement was born to correct the assumption of climate-affected people as inherently agentless victims. Climate justice predicates itself on the notion that people-driven coalition building has more impact on creating sustainable solutions to climate change than state-led migratory legislation and agreements alone.<sup>52</sup> One facet of climate justice reforms looks towards indigenous traditional knowledge as innovative ways for climate change mitigation. Elders in these Pacific island communities have drawn upon traditional modes of climate adaptation and have implemented some cosmetic mitigation tactics to their island homes, such as building artificial breakwalls out of cement and coral.<sup>53</sup> Though these initiatives are not enough on their

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<sup>50</sup> Martinez-Alier, Joan, “Environmentalism of the Poor,” *Science Direct: Geoforum*. Vol 54: 239, July 2014

<sup>51</sup> McAdam, “Swimming against the tide.” *University of New South Wales*. 26 November 2010.

<sup>52</sup> McAdam, “Swimming against the Tide.” *University of New South Wales*. 26 November 2010.

<sup>53</sup> McNamara, Karen E. and Prasad Shirleen S, “Valuing indigenous knowledge for climate change adaptation planning in Fiji and Vanuatu,” *Traditional Knowledge Review*. 1 July 2013,

own to curb climate change's destruction, this commitment to grassroots climate change action emulates a similar dynamic in SIDSs international climate politics.

Moreover, climate justice comes from the standpoint that modern systems of production have exploited traditionally marginalized communities and have denied them agency over their own environments. In the Pacific case, this would trace back to the colonial histories and relationships between island states and their former colonizers. Because many Pacific environmental issues have root in colonial extraction (such as the US nuclear testing in the Marshall Islands and Australia-led phosphate depletion in Nauru), climate justice advocates argue that there needs to be adequate reparations made in regards to this historic exploitative relationship. Just as our understanding of slow violence attributes its debilitating, expansive nature to the onset of extractive capitalism, the foundations of climate justice call for a rejection of capitalist systems and modes of production.

Proponents of climate justice argue that this reparational transition must be made through the reclaiming of environmental, political, and economic power. Reparational climate justice initiatives have been adopted into many movements regarding indigenous rights and sovereignty worldwide; the Standing Rock protests in the US and the Mapuche movements in Chile are examples of such causes. One can view the Pacific Island nations as a case study in a broader global movement for climate justice predicated on a resistance against Western hegemony and fight for indigenous survival. A commitment to true climate justice is a rejection of the human and environmental exploitation that has been wrought upon the globe by an unchecked, capitalist imperialism.

Due to its emphasis on historical reparations, the fight for climate justice is inherently anti-colonial. The coalition building and support networking fostered by small Pacific island

states is built upon a shared identity as post-colonial nations. In the Pacific, the roots of climate degradation, exploitation, and migration all stem from the abuses committed under colonialism and their lasting legacies. As a small island state, to have a voice in international negotiations is to reject the hegemonic norms established under international institutions. Instead of having their fate be decided by the United Nations, Pacific island leaders have championed their right to survival through unconventional means domestically and internationally. Fundamentally, the push towards the recognition of climate refugees fits into a broader fight towards a more radical and equalizing climate justice agenda. By understanding climate refugees as a critique of the broader hegemonic human rights regime, we can begin to understand how these moves towards Pacific survival have root in anti-colonial practice and thought.

### **Argument and Discussion of Subsequent Chapters**

The fight for climate justice extends far beyond the parameters of a new international refugee clause. True climate justice comes from a commitment to overhauling our current climate change diplomatic system and mandating reparations to address the deep colonial trauma inflicted upon the Global South. While the quest for a complete climate justice regime is a long term, ambitious process, the success of climate-related migration justice represents a significant progression of these movements. In order to understand the significance of this move, we must first look at the intent and impact of our current international legal framework regarding displacement and asylum. The current working refugee regime has deliberate roots in past power politics and reinforces an imbalanced relationship between Global North and Global South<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Throughout this thesis, I engage with the terms “Global North/South” in order to refer to the understood dynamic between the “developed” and “developing” worlds. I use these terms out of convenience and their common acceptance, however I do not necessarily agree or advocate of their continued use. There must be a more nuanced

countries. Throughout this thesis, I aim to understand how these tiny, seemingly geopolitically-insignificant islands were so successful in advancing their climate justice agenda within hegemonic, international institutions. I argue that this diplomatic success is the direct result of the translation of climate change into captivating media spectacles that caught the attention of diplomats and international audiences alike. Subsequently, the emotive performances of these narratives in the UN broke the traditionally stoic norms of diplomacy and challenged our long-held presumption of “rational” discourse. Ultimately, the engaging and captivating imagery campaign led by a coalition of governmental and non-governmental climate activists brought about this unprecedented change in an institutional world order predicated on inequality and deprivation of agency.

Chapter 1 will seek to understand how our human rights regime was derived from an international political scape born out of the rubble of World War II. The success of Pacific climate activists in the UN is not without significant geopolitical and historic context--to give adequate reverence to the accomplishments of these small island nations, we must first understand the background of the position of these Pacific island states. Historically, the Pacific islands have been the objects of global power politics, not the subject. Many islands in the South Pacific have at times been held under Western (and Japanese) colonial control, and only recently gained full political and economic autonomy. The United Nations was chartered as the facilitator of a new world order, however it was subject to lasting power dynamics and inequalities between state powers. As exemplified by the creation of the Pacific Territory Trust, (the UN ruling that gave America undivided control over Micronesia) this global order prioritized power politics over authentic human rights justice. Subsequent decisions regarding global humanitarian

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discussion around how we identify actors in our world order, however this analysis is much larger than the scope of my research project.

migration and refugee status also demonstrate this prioritization of politics over human rights. America's colonial rule in Micronesia ushered in a new nuclear age, and with it a new era of environmental terrorism. The nuclear campaign and the ensuing health and ecological damage in the Pacific is a clear example of the 'slow' violence that colonized people continue to face as a result of imperial legacies. These legacies shape the social, political, and environmental inequalities that set the stage for the rise of Pacific climate activism.

Chapter 2 will explore the significance of the Pacific media campaign regarding the "sinking islands" and related media tropes in the fight for climate justice. This phenomena exists within the context of our current media scene that prioritizes flashy headlines and share-able content that evoke strong emotional responses.<sup>55</sup> As exemplified by the case of the Marshall Islands, "slow" violence is often disregarded in our broader discussions of human rights abuses given its extensive timeframe and nuanced origins. Despite this historic exclusion of slow, environmental-based violence, Pacific advocates have effectively translated their experience with environmental violence through a coalition of creative and eye-catching media spectacles. While our reliance on sudden "spectacular" instances of human rights abuses has historically disenfranchised proponents of "slow violence" activism, the case of the Pacific Islands demonstrates that spectacles can also be used as an instrument for bringing widespread attention to "slow violence." Pacific activists have harnessed the power of spectacular media images to get their experience with climate change validated and recognized by international audiences. By analyzing theories regarding the power of imaginative rhetoric and spectacle, we can analyze not only how Pacific island coalitions have formed around unifying identities, but also how they have collectively elicited a strong response from a distant international community. By

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<sup>55</sup> Haas, Peter, "Social constructivism and the evolution of multilateral environmental governance," *Globalization and Governance*, 2009.

glamorizing their struggles into captivating media narratives, Pacific activists have immortalized their roles as spokespeople in a climate-progressive future.

Chapter 3 will examine the structural changes to UN debate that allowed for the translation of these media narratives into discursive action in the United Nations Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) committee meetings. The integration of non-governmental and independent media voices directly into diplomatic processes made for a more robust, new-age era of multilateralism. Alongside this structural change came a Pacific-driven overhaul of the stoic, masculine norms of debate. Emotions have traditionally been omitted from diplomatic performances, given their connotations with vulnerability and passivity. While emotional testimony has been typically overlooked given its unprofessional reputation, Pacific diplomats demonstrate that its selective and strategic use can bring about a particularly strong call to action.<sup>56</sup> The Pacific delegation's inclusion of dramatic, emotive diplomatic performances effectively "broke" the norms of stiff, masculine debate etiquette and further progressed the climate agendas of the Pacific Islands delegations. The adoption of climate migration rulings and accords is testament to the creative, innovative, and transformative campaign led by an array of Pacific climate activists. Ultimately, these activists countered their experience with slow violence and oppressive imperial structures with a creative, collaborative media and diplomatic alliance. Not only has Pacific representation shaped global imaginations surrounding the brutal realities of climate change, they have also shattered our conception of what successful diplomacy looks like.

Overall, the success of the Pacific delegation to the 2015 Paris Accords can be understood as a creative, collaborative, and strategic rejection of institutional apathy and inaction

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<sup>56</sup> Farbotko, Carol & McGregor, Helen, "Copenhagen, climate science and the emotional geographies of climate change." *Australian Geographer*, 07 July 2010

regarding slow violence. While our institutions and media platforms have historically omitted the experiences of Global South advocates, these Pacific climate justice activists have demonstrated that media attention and effective diplomatic performances can translate into discursive change and success internationally. Through a collaboration of both governmental and non-governmental forces, Pacific island activists have successfully countered our diplomatic indifference towards systematic injustices and have demanded meaningful climate action from world leaders. The significance of this campaign is rooted in the longstanding violence and marginalization that these activists have endured at the hands of the United Nations.

## **Chapter 1: Nuclear Warfare--a Human Rights Project**

“Tree let your naked arms fall  
nor extend vain entreaties to the radiant ball.

This is no gallant monsoon's flash,  
no dashing trade wind's blast,  
The fading green of your magic  
emanations shall not make pure again  
these polluted skies . . . for this  
is no ordinary sun.”

--*No Ordinary Sun*, by Hone Tuwhare, 1968

On the morning of July 1, 1946, two suns rose over the Eastern horizon above Bikini Atoll. A snow of ash fluttered over neighboring islands--its shadows a stark contrast to the blinding flare that woke the morning sky. As Maori poet Hone Tuwhare's iconic poem details, the nuclear testing in the Pacific irreversibly changed life in the Pacific and brought forth an era marked by the unknown--a life awakened by “no ordinary sun.” Though little was known about the capacity and effects of the American nuclear testing in the Pacific, the nuclear campaign would shape the lives of the Marshallese into one of forced migration, terminal illness, and a lasting trauma that would go largely unnoticed to the world's eye.

It would seem contradictory to insist that the nuclear abuse suffered by the Marshallese was carried out in the name of human rights. It would seem equally contradictory to argue that the foundations of our current international human rights regime have roots in colonial legacies and function to uphold state power. However misplaced these ideas might seem in our typical understanding of human rights, we must analyze the historic inter-state dynamics that shape international relations and negotiations today. As we look into current and historic instances of climate-induced migration, we can begin to understand the purpose behind the current lack of legal frameworks meant to facilitate humanitarian movement.

In order to understand the ideology behind the United Nations, one must first understand the power dynamics at play leading to its inception. Prior to and during the Second World War, the world was divided among colonial powers, and many countries in the Global South were held under European control. At the height of its power, the imperial world system existed within two planes of operation: the formal and informal empires.<sup>57</sup> Formal holdings over land constituted traditional notions of colonial holdings, while informal empire existed as the perpetuation of European thought and “soft power.” As the British and American empires began to shed their formal colonies after the end of World War II, their ideational power was further solidified within the structure and framework of the United Nations.

The creation of the UN represented a metamorphosis of European imperial power; instead of dismantling existing forms of colonialism, we see the institutionalization of this power through the UN framework. Within an introspective analysis of the UN refugee regime, we can provide further empirical foundation to Anthony Pagdanes’ claim that “Human Rights is a

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<sup>57</sup> Osterhammel, Jurgen, “Decolonization: a short history,” *Princeton University Press*, 2019.

development from European efforts to legitimize its overseas empire.”<sup>58</sup> The human rights regime established under the United Nations--especially how it applies to refugee status and statehood--reinforces the unequal power dynamic that existed under colonial rule. Likewise, the Refugee Convention of 1951 drew heavily from Cold War agendas and rhetoric, further legitimizing the political conquests of predominantly Western superpowers. This doctrine was created as a means to solidify the logistical power of Western states to gain leverage over the USSR through the specific incorporation of Western-sympathizing individuals into society. The framework of refugee resettlement is inherently rooted in Western interests rather than any advancements in seemingly egalitarian, progressive philanthropy. The United Nations is a lasting testament to the organizational legacy inaugurated by the League of Nations and is linked through the progression of empire and global order that emerged out of the final decades of “formal” European colonial rule.<sup>59</sup> Understanding the United Nations as a continuation of this propagation of empire allows us to make broader connections between its principles of Universal Human Rights, and its fundamentally inadequate refugee program.

The US involvement in the Marshall Islands is particularly exemplary of this imperial relationship. Originally, the Marshall Islands were held under German imperial power until the Japanese took control during World War II and institutionalized such control through the League of Nations. Mitchell-Eaton argues that the institutionalized Japanese colonialism in the islands set important precedent for later American occupation of the land.<sup>60</sup> The staging of the Pacific military theatre in the islands during World War II also proliferated Western influence

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<sup>58</sup> Pagden, Anthony, "Human rights, natural rights, and europe's imperial legacy," *Political Theory* 31, no. 2 171-99, 2003.

<sup>59</sup> Mazower, Mark, “No enchanted palace: the end of empire and the ideological origins of the united nations,” *Princeton University Press*, 2009,

<sup>60</sup> Mitchell-Eaton, Emily, “New destinations of empire: imperial migration from the marshall islands to northwest arkansas.” *Syracuse University*. 2016

throughout the region. After the Japanese had lost the war, the United States annexed the Marshall Islands through the UN-backed Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands (TTPI) which granted the US “full powers of administration, legislation, and jurisdiction over the territory.”<sup>61</sup> While the mission of Trusteeships in the UN is to help foster the conditions of independence for local governance, the United States had clear military and political interests in this acquisition.

The fundamental critiques of the UN as a tool of imperial legacies is exemplified by the relationship of the US and the Pacific region. The United States’ involvement in Marshall Islands represents an interest-driven contortion of the human rights framework to best fit the nation’s individual political goals. In order to understand how the political and militaristic power of the US inevitably fostered the conditions of migration in the Marshall Islands, we must examine the implementation of American interests through the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands. The TTPI was established under the premise that the citizens of the Marshall Islands needed America’s help to develop the conditions for independence following the defeat of the Japanese empire in WWII. Under the Trusteeship, the American government was tasked with protecting the Marshallese population’s human rights and claim to their ancestral homeland. The US, however, used the TTPI as a means to justify their nuclear testing and anti-Soviet military expansion in the Pacific, which came at the detriment of many of their Pacific subjects.

During the period of nuclear testing, the American military forcibly removed Marshall Islanders from their homelands and resettled them on neighboring atolls. These islanders faced severe health issues and near starvation as a result of these American military tests and policies. Despite the destruction of their homelands and abhorrent conditions that they faced at the hands of the Americans, the Marshallese could legally never be considered a “refugee” under the

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<sup>61</sup> Mitchell-Eaton, Emily, “New destinations of empire: imperial migration from the marshall islands to northwest Arkansas,” *Syracuse University*, 2016

United Nations definition, and therefore never receive any international migratory assistance.

While the condition of the Marshall Islands worsened due to environmental factors, Marshallese representatives negotiated the Compact of Free Association, which established a system of bilateral migration to the United States. The Compact established what scholars refer to as *imperial migration*--one in which subjects move from their homeland to their colonial power and can never obtain full rights and benefits of full citizenship. By opting for a limited migration agreement, the United States can deny subjects the full rights and recognition of refugeehood and avoid the “bad press” of having committed human rights abuses against its own subjects.

In this chapter, I will explore how the use of the refugee system lends itself to Western state power, and understand that its fundamental deficiency and inability to adapt to changing political climates functions to uphold the unequal power structures established under colonialism. I will first examine the implications of the state-centric model of the United Nations, and then analyze two conflicting implications of its human rights regime. As a subset of its human rights regime, I will then discuss how the UN refugee program can be understood both as a humanitarian lifeline and a mechanism of state power politics. Then, to support the claim that powerful states use the UN to carry out foreign policy projects, I will introduce the case of the Marshall Islands. By looking into the United States’ 1946 acquisition of the Marshall Islands through the UN-granted Pacific Island Trust, we can begin to understand how notions of state sovereignty and imperialism were shaped by the creation of the United Nations. Then, by analyzing how the UN refugee regime systematically excludes those fleeing conditions of colonialism--namely environmental degradation--we can draw connections regarding the intent and impact of the regime itself. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and UN Refugee Convention were not borne out of a movement towards universal, egalitarian human rights, but

rather exist to further support existing global power dynamics and international politics. The continued use of imperial and political conventions for humanitarian assistance inherently discriminates against certain human rights abuses, and has led to an international failure to protect those fleeing environmental and colonial causes.

### **Interpretations UN's State-Centric Structure**

The creation of the UN in 1945 signified the establishment of a new world order. The United Nations as an institution predicated itself around the recognition and incorporation of concrete, defined states. The conceptualization of physical "statehood" is intrinsically a European political device. As Boaz Atzili argues, "State borders are social constructs. Different international systems have historically maintained different types of international borders."<sup>62</sup> Our contemporary notion of a state-based world order emerged because of the power and interests of global superpowers. This is exemplified in the makeup of the United Nations' Security Council, which prioritizes the interests of the 5 victors of WWII with permanent positions in the decision making branch of the UN. The institutionalization of states was not only something that reinforced existing global superpowers, it also laid out the foundations for state building for former colonies as well.<sup>63</sup>

The institutionalization of finite states had significant effects on the nations in the "global periphery." As Hamza Alavi analyzes, many post colonial states underwent a period of institutional instability following decolonization movements due to the underdevelopment of internal independent political mechanisms. The establishment of the United Nations was an

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<sup>62</sup> Atzili, Boaz, "When good fences make bad neighbors," *International Security*, 31:3, 2006.

<sup>63</sup> Weiss, Thomas, "The United Nations, before, during, and after 1945." *Oxford University Press*, 2015.

apparent multilateral stride towards a coveted “global governance.”<sup>64</sup> While this concept was framed as something entirely new and revolutionary, Craig Murphy understands the phenomena of global governance as a concept dating back to the 1850s, when colonial rule and empire were at their height.<sup>65</sup> It was during the height of European colonialism and imperial rule under which a primary “global governance” was first established. The relations and interactions of defined territories were already functioning within the framework of imperial rule--the United Nations simply institutionalized such dynamics after the fall of formal colonial systems.

By putting these existing powers into privileged seats on the UN Security Council, the P5 nations gave themselves the power to decide the status of former colonies such as the Marshall Islands. The Security Council members had the jurisdiction to declare disputed territories as independent “states” or as dependent “trust territories.”<sup>66</sup> While the United Nations outwardly prides itself on being an inclusive forum for sovereign nations, its state-centric model allowed for already-powerful states to determine the political status of territories worldwide. Evidently, this model reflects a power dynamic reminiscent of colonialism.

Aside from dominating the actual framework of the organization, the state-centric model of the United Nations also undergirds its human rights regime. States have the inherent power to recognize human rights, even though they are not attributed as the distributors or creators of such individual freedoms.<sup>67</sup> The 1947 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) places the practice of Human Rights protection on state governments and reinforces the state as the primary international decision-makers. Likewise, the foundations of the UDHR defines human rights as

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<sup>64</sup> Weiss, Thomas, “The united nations, before, during, and after 1945,” *Oxford University Press*, 2015.

<sup>65</sup> Murphy, Craig, “Global governance: poorly done and poorly understood,” *International Affairs*, Vol 76: 4, October 2000 .

<sup>66</sup> Cox, Larry, & Yoo, John, "Are human rights universal?" *The Brown Journal of World Affairs* 16, no. 1 , 9-20. 2009.

<sup>67</sup> Cox, Larry, & Yoo, John, "Are human rights universal?" *The Brown Journal of World Affairs* 16, no. 1 , 9-20. 2009.

something inherently political and tied to statehood. These political leanings and interpretations of rights have therefore shaped both the intent and impact of the international UN human rights regime.

*Interpretations of the Human Rights Regime: Universally Philanthropic v. Western-Centric*

There are two primary interpretations of the influence of the Human Rights regime. The first and most-commonly-held interpretation attributes the creation of the UN Declaration of Human Rights as progressive and altruistic; the second examines the regime as hegemonic Western doctrine that reinforces Western political thought and power. The most commonly-accepted theory for the creation of the international human rights regime is that it was born out of a universal understanding of the “Rights of Man.”<sup>68</sup> Larry Cox, a scholar on the origins of the United Nations, argues that this push towards the Declaration of Human Rights was the result of a universal commitment towards human rights doctrine and cohesion of multilateral interpretations, as well as the conglomeration of diversified values and cultural norms, of the inherent rights of man. To Cox, human rights are unique in that they have been the only political and moral idea to have received universal acceptance.”<sup>69</sup>

Similarly, Jamie Mayerfield argues for the intrinsic values of institutionalized human rights. She believed that the principles and philosophy behind human rights are able to withstand the critiques of cultural relativism.<sup>70</sup> Mayerfield attests that there must be a formalized legal backing of human rights laws in order to uphold and solidify its legitimacy. To scholars like

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<sup>68</sup> United Nations. “Universal declaration of human rights.” *United Nations*. 1948.

<sup>69</sup> Cox, Larry, & Yoo, John, "Are human rights universal?" *The Brown Journal of World Affairs* 16, no. 1 , 9-20. 2009.

<sup>70</sup> Mayerfeld, Jamie, "Human rights," In *The Promise of Human Rights: Constitutional Government, Democratic Legitimacy, and International Law*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016.

Mayersfield, the only way we can adequately protect human rights is by consistently adapting and amending the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. While we can critique the UDHR for how accurately it speaks for the inherent rights of man, we cannot deny the actual principles of human rights themselves. Additionally, Mayerfield argues that the Declaration deliberately leaves many subjects open for individual and collective judgement. The interpretative aspect of the Declaration of Human Rights, however, leads to many contradictory implementations of such human rights principles.

While typically the United Nations' human rights program is examined in a positive light, much emerging literature has focused on the imperial origins and hypocritical nature of the program.<sup>71</sup> Despite the apparent display of universalist philanthropy, the discourse around creating the UN borrowed heavily from established European imperialist thought.<sup>72</sup> Critical human rights thinkers therefore argue that the United Nations can never completely remove itself from its ideological predecessor, the League of Nations. Because the League of Nations was a colonial institution meant to uphold imperial systems, the United Nations--as the organizational child of the League--will inherently propagate these principles. Mark Mazower also highlights that many of the notable thinkers and scholars behind the League and the UN had interests in maintaining the imperial powers of their nation-states.

Similar interpretations of the human rights regime attribute its inception as a product of Western imperial thought, and an institutionalization of both soft and rigid forms of Western ideological hegemony. Scholars such as Jack Donnelly look towards the declaration itself as a mirror image of fundamental Western constitutions such as those of the United States and

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<sup>71</sup> Mayerfeld, Jamie, "Human rights," In *The Promise of Human Rights: Constitutional Government, Democratic Legitimacy, and International Law*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016.

<sup>72</sup> Mazower, Mark, "No enchanted palace: the end of empire and the ideological origins of the United Nations." *Princeton University Press*, 2009.

France.<sup>73</sup> The ideas of personal freedom, speech, and human dignity arose from European scholarly discourse and was hardly a collaboration of the intellectual traditions of diverse cultures. As we can clearly discern how Western ideology shaped the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, we must ask ourselves how does this Western-centrism affect our human rights responses, and more specifically our international refugee program?

*Interpretations of the UN Refugee Regime: Philanthropy v. Power Politics*

A fundamental facet of the larger human rights regime, the UN's refugee program functions as a prime example of the "extraterritorial obligations" of states. In the eyes of Thomas Gammeltoft-Hansen, "Refugees are human rights violations made visible."<sup>74</sup> Scholarly debate on the UN refugee regime therefore follows a split similar to that of the broader literature on human rights: the UNHCR refugee system is seen as either a just, charitable means of ensuring individual liberties, or a political smokescreen for international power politics.

The protection of refugees under international law is significant in several regards. While the protection and benefits of "refugee" individuals may vary between countries, there are certain benefits that are typically universal. Firstly, refugees resettled in a new country have the ability to work and bring immediate family members into host nations. In the United States, refugees are given priority status for green card applications after one year of residence in the country.<sup>75</sup> With a green card, immigrants have permanent legal status in the country and can access benefits such as social security and medicare after a certain period of time. Achieving refugee status

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<sup>73</sup> Donnelly, Jack. "The universal declaration model." *Universal Human Rights in Theory and Practice*, Cornell University Press, , 24-39. 2013.

<sup>74</sup> Gammeltoft-Hansen, Thomas. "Growing barriers: international refugee law." *Universal Human Rights and Extraterritorial Obligations*, 55-81. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010..

<sup>75</sup> N.a. "Immigration: Benefits of getting refugee status." *Women's Law Center*. 2018.

makes the migration process more streamlined and efficient--while in some cases obtaining “legal” migration to the US can take upwards of 20 years,<sup>76</sup> refugee status can (in theory) expedite this process. This, however, is contingent on the host country’s commitment to incorporating asylum seekers, and can take a considerable amount of time depending on how politicized their conflicts are globally. Regardless of the political status of individuals within a particular country, refugee status itself provides asylum seekers with legal protection and recognition within the international community.

At a deeper ideological level--as Mark Franken argues--international responses to refugee influxes appeals to the moral high ground of high-receiving nations like the United States. This interpretation helps to reinforce the notion that the UN’s refugee regime stems from altruistic intentions.<sup>77</sup> Yet, even though the appeals to accept refugees is made in moral terms, the very fact that these appeals have to be made underscores the fact that the refugee system itself prioritizes the demands of receiving nations over the needs of sending countries--each individual receiving state can lay out exactly the number and demographics of asylum-seekers they are willing to incorporate.<sup>78</sup> This means that countries who are on the receiving end of the refugee process have the upper-hand in shaping the realities of displaced persons. The uneven dynamic between state powers was in fact exemplified during the drafting of the Refugee Convention in 1951.

During the drafting of the 1951 Refugee Convention, Western nations dominated the discussion; out of the 26 states participating in the discussion, 21 were in Western Europe.<sup>79</sup> The

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<sup>76</sup> N.a. “Immigration: Benefits of getting refugee status.” *Women’s Law Center*. 2018.

<sup>77</sup> Franken, Mark,. "Admitting refugees for resettlement: a mission of rescue." *In Defense of the Alien* 26 188-200. 2003.

<sup>78</sup> Franken, Mark,. "Admitting refugees for resettlement: a mission of rescue." *In Defense of the Alien* 26 188-200. 2003.

<sup>79</sup> N.a, “Refugee Convention,” *United Nations*. 1951

Soviet Union was conveniently excluded from these talks and did not have a say on drafting the convention; the refugee regime was after all intended as an anti-communist political bargaining tool of the West to expand their ideological sphere of influence against the Soviet Union. The 1951 Convention itself defines a refugee as someone who is fleeing persecution based on race, religion, nationality, membership to a certain social group, or political opinion.<sup>80</sup> Under this model, receiving countries typically chose which refugees they would accept based on a political rationale.<sup>81</sup> During the Cold-War era, this encouraged countries like the US to accept individuals who were fleeing communist rule in Eastern Europe, especially from countries such as East Germany, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia. Political refugees from these countries were seen as potential spies or harborers of vital information on the inner workings of the USSR and its satellite states across Eastern Europe. Because of the language of the Refugee Convention, democratically-leaning individuals were particularly protected under the “refugee” title. Though the Cold-War dynamic has since faded from the international stage, the current refugee system still exists under its original, communist-centric definition. The criteria for refugee status is intrinsically linked to political status internationally. This same political preference was given to pro-government individuals fleeing El Salvador in the 1980 Civil War who looked to seek asylum in the United States. Because these individuals were fleeing communist and anti-Western forces, they were accepted and given preferential refugee status.<sup>82</sup> The United States’ Cold-War-driven interest in the conflict prompted the Reagan administration to pass the 1980 Refugee Law that allowed for the expedited processing of El Salvadoran refugees during this time period.

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<sup>80</sup> N.a, “Refugee convention,” *United Nations*. 1951

<sup>81</sup> Gammeltoft-Hansen, Thomas, "Growing barriers: international refugee law," *Universal Human Rights and Extraterritorial Obligations*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 55-81, 2010.

<sup>82</sup> Gammeltoft-Hansen, Thomas, "Growing barriers: international refugee law," *Universal Human Rights and Extraterritorial Obligations*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 55-81, 2010.

Critics of the UN Refugee resettlement system often argue that the 1951 Refugee Convention is not a humanitarian doctrine, but rather an anti-communist one.<sup>83</sup>

Because of this heavily-politicized definition, the Refugee Convention excludes individuals seeking protection from issues unrelated to political persecution. This politicized definition of a “refugee” excludes individuals who are fleeing economic or environmental destruction, which creates legal and political gray areas in states deeply affected by environmental destruction like the Marshall Islands. Despite the clear need for humanitarian-based migration in these cases, the United Nations still relies on its dated, insufficient refugee doctrine. This inability to adapt the refugee system to account for changing political problems such as climate change and environmental degradation shows the inherent Western biases of the international order and a fundamental lacking on the part of the UN Human Rights regime. Likewise, this outlook ignores the human rights abuses and neglect caused by neo-imperial oversight of trusteeship holdings like the United States’ control over the Pacific islands.

### *The Trusteeship Council*

When the United Nations was formed in 1945, its founding states came together to propose a system that would supposedly honor the independence and sovereignty of the world's nations. Yet, the structure of the United Nations was based on existing power dynamics of WWII and entitled the five victors of the war to permanent seats on the executive Security Council. At its inception, these United Nations founders established the Trusteeship Council, which oversaw the political administration of 11 “trust territories” extending from British Cameroon and Italian Somalia in Africa to the American oversight of Micronesia in the Pacific. The Trusteeship

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<sup>83</sup> N.a, “Immigration: Benefits of getting refugee status,” *Women’s Law Center*, 2018.

Council was in turn to be run by the five members of the Security Council--China, France, the Soviet Union, the UK and the US--which came to become known as the P5. Trusteeship in the United Nations occupies an almost contradictory status to the organization's founding principles of global sovereignty; the United Nations Trusteeship Council was officially meant to create an organ to "promote the advancement of the inhabitants of Trust Territories in their progressive development in self-governance and independence,"<sup>84</sup> while overseeing the political, economic and administrative functions of a territory. Basically, the UN would grant trusteeship of a territory to a guardian nation-state in order for the parent state to help the territory to "develop" the conditions for independence.

At the Yalta Convention of 1945, P5 leaders agreed that territorial trusteeship would apply only to existing League of Nations mandates, territories detached from the enemy as a result of war, and any other territory that might voluntarily be placed under trusteeship.<sup>85</sup> This means that the P5 members of the UN would then be responsible for the oversight and governance of any territory seized from the losing empires of WWII. Tellingly, the members also agreed that "all Trust Territories would have a clearly recognized right to eventual self-determination, but that in some cases the administering authority would have the right to fortify its territory, a power denied under the League, for international peace and security."<sup>86</sup>

In 1947, the United Nations declared the Pacific region of Micronesia a "Strategic Trust" of the United States of America. A "Strategic Trust" differed from other UN Trusteeships in that it allowed the administering authority to fortify and close any parts of the strategic area for

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<sup>84</sup> Chand, Ganeshwar. "The united states and the origins of the trusteeship system," *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* 14, no. 2 pp.171-230. 1991.

<sup>85</sup> Chand, Ganeshwar. "The united states and the origins of the trusteeship system," *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* 14, no. 2 pp.171-230. 1991.

<sup>86</sup> N.a. "Immigration: benefits of getting refugee status." *Women's Law Center*, 2018.

“security reasons.” The task of promoting "security" and "ensuring peace" within the territory of a strategic trust was left deliberately open and interpretive, so as to grant the overseeing country as much freedom in their administration of the region. As the TTPI gave the United States exclusive control of these islands for an indefinite amount of time, the United States took this opportunity to "promote security" in the Pacific region through the establishment of key military hubs in the Marshall Islands during the 1940s and '50s. These Marshallese bases coalesced with bases in Okinawa and Hawaii to lay the foundation for what military scholars refer to as the "American Lake" of the North Pacific.<sup>87</sup> Following WWII,

In particular, the US had two key military interests in the Pacific region. Firstly, the acquisition of the islands gave the United States ample space and authority to conduct tests of its newly developed nuclear arsenals. Between 1946 and 1958, the United States conducted over one hundred nuclear tests throughout the Pacific--namely on Bikini and Eronawak atolls. Sasha Davis states, “Simply put, the first presentation of American hegemony to the world was performed on the stage of Bikini Atoll.”<sup>88</sup> Secondly, the US wanted to oversee the strategic Pacific region in order to prevent the spread of Soviet ideological and military influence. While at first the nuclear tests themselves acted as a display of American weaponry and military might, the continued American presence in the Marshall Islands after the end of the nuclear program signified an economic and ideological claim of the region. Ultimately, the United States used the UN Trusteeship Council to levy its own military and political interests in the Pacific Islands; to this end, Washington maintained veto power over any actions by the governments of Pacific

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<sup>87</sup>N.a. “Immigration: benefits of getting refugee status,” *Women’s Law Center*, 2018.

<sup>88</sup>Mitchell-Eaton, “New destinations of empire: imperial migration from the Marshall Islands to Northwest Arkansas,” *Syracuse University*, 2016

island territories that it considered adverse to American security interests.<sup>89</sup> With these security interests in mind, we can understand how the United States used the UN Trusteeship to carry out its own foreign policy agendas rather than altruistically promote “conditions for independence.”<sup>90</sup>

### US Nuclear Testing

The nuclear bombing of Bikini Atoll produced the iconic imagery of massive mushroom clouds over an expansive Pacific Ocean. What is lesser known, however, is what happened to the population of Marshallese who called Bikini their home. In July of 1946, the United States military forcibly removed 167 native Bikinians from the island and relocated them to Rongerik atoll--an atoll that was considerably smaller than Bikini and lacked a coral barrier reef. The decision to use Bikini as a test site came from the US military’s desire to conduct testing in a remote, isolated place that would cause as little damage to military vessels or personnel as possible. As the US continued with their nuclear violence against the Bikinians, the commodore overseeing the nuclear project in the Pacific explained to the islanders that they were a “chosen people” whose sacrifice would benefit “the future of mankind.”<sup>91</sup>

On Rongerik, the American Trust Territory administration had only left the Marshallese with a few weeks’ worth of food and supplies. Here, many Bikinians grew ill and malnourished

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<sup>89</sup> Smith-Norris, Martha, "Negotiating a cold war treaty: the united states, the marshall islands, and the compact of free association." *Domination and Resistance: The United States and the Marshall Islands during the Cold War*, 125-51. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2016.

<sup>90</sup> Smith-Norris, Martha, "Negotiating a cold war treaty: the united states, the marshall islands, and the compact of free association." *Domination and Resistance: The United States and the Marshall Islands during the Cold War*, 125-51. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2016.

<sup>91</sup>N.a “The marshall islands,” *Atomic Heritage Foundation*, The National Museum of Nuclear Science and History. Online. N.d.

due to the radioactivity present in their fish supplies, as well as the lack of natural resources.<sup>92</sup> As the United States continuously ignored their request for more supplies, the small population of resettled Bikinians faced near starvation.<sup>93</sup> Under the administration of the strategic trust, the United States was tasked with "promoting the economic advancement and self-sufficiency of the inhabitants, and [protecting] the inhabitants against the loss of their lands and resources."<sup>94</sup> The United States had not only failed to uphold their promise of the protection of the Marshallese people and their homelands, the United Nations also denied the Marshallese protection of their human rights.

The continued bombings of Bikini and Enewatak atolls also caused severe harm to neighboring islanders with little to no advanced warning or communication from the Trust Territory Administration. Leading up to the Baker test--the first test of the Hydrogen bomb, which was over 1,000 times as powerful as the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki--the US did not inform islanders about the tests that would be conducted. As the nuclear fallout from the massive explosion made its way to neighboring inhabited atolls, observers reported Marshallese children playing in the white, flakey nuclear fallout like snow. Unknowing of its potential effects, many children had put the fallout into their mouths and fell severely ill.<sup>95</sup>

After their relocation by the US government, the Marshallese filed a complaint with the United Nations in 1948 on the basis that their human rights and homeland had been violated by the nuclear testing on Bikini and Enewetak. In 1948, the United Nations rejected the Marshallese

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<sup>92</sup>N.a "The marshall islands," *Atomic Heritage Foundation*, The National Museum of Nuclear Science and History. Online. N.d.

<sup>93</sup>Niedenthal, Jack, "Bikini atoll: a short history of the people of bikini atoll," *Bikini Heritage foundation*. 2009.

<sup>94</sup> Niedenthal, Jack, "Bikini atoll: a short history of the people of bikini atoll," *Bikini Heritage foundation*, 2009.

<sup>95</sup>Niedenthal, Jack, "Bikini atoll: a short history of the people of bikini atoll," *Bikini Heritage foundation*, 2009.

complaint against the US's nuclear testing on Bikini atoll. This rejection comes less than a year after the UN had formally passed the Universal Declaration on Human Rights.

Following the tests on Bikini, the United States continued its pattern of relocating entire island populations. In the 1950s, the US military offered to resettle Bikinians to their original homeland, despite scientific indications that the island was still too radioactive to sustain human life. Following many relocations and resettlements, many islanders ended up on Enewetak and Kili atolls. Many years after the official nuclear test programs, the threat of nuclear contamination in the Marshall Islands is still very much present. On Enewetak atoll, the United States disposed of 3.1 million cubic feet worth of radioactive soil and debris in a large concrete dome named Runit.<sup>96</sup> The dome--or nuclear "tomb" as many Marshallese call it--is now starting to leak due to rising sea levels and tides, and threatens the local Marshallese population. The combination of nuclear legacies and climate change has made the living conditions in the Marshall Islands increasingly precarious.

Likewise, in 2011, Kili atoll was subject to major flooding and coastal inundation as the result of a particularly bad cyclone season. Many people found their homes flooded and the small airport runway--which is the atoll's sole connection and access to imported supplies--entirely unusable. If the second home of these Bikinians also becomes uninhabitable, where can these individuals go? As climate change continues to threaten these particularly vulnerable communities, migration becomes increasingly inevitable.

The International Organization on Migration--the branch of the United Nations tasked with documenting and facilitating migration--argues that there is seldom just one reason propelling people to migrate. In the case of the Pacific Islands, while environmental forces have

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<sup>96</sup>Rust, Suzanne, "How the us betrayed the marshall islands, kindling the next nuclear disaster," *LA Times*, 10 Nov 2019.

brought forth many challenges to the local populations, climate change has largely acted as a catalyst that worsened existing conditions for migration. These existing conditions primarily are economic and social in nature and have been shaped by the nuclear histories and conditions of these Pacific nations. The American military expansion and nuclear testing in the region has also altered how Marshallese interact with their island home and created the pockets of urbanized communities on certain atolls. Factors like access to natural resources, self-governance, and urbanization are all key in shaping Pacific migration and responses to climate change. Under the oversight of the American Trust Territory, the wellbeing of the Marshallese population came second to the political interests of the American military.

#### Cold War interests in the Pacific

In addition to the increased nuclear testing in the region, The United States looked at the Pacific Trust Territory as a way to preserve its own security interest against the Soviet Union. During the height of the Cold War, American involvement in the Pacific region was “useful as both a potential defensive barrier against Soviet expansion and a springboard for the projection of American power.”<sup>97</sup> The positioning of American vessels and nuclear arsenal in the Marshall Islands served two primary functions. Firstly, it served as the first defense against the Soviets should the US find a need for military action. Part of the impetus behind creating the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands was for the United States to push out any other competing powers in the region. In the event of Soviet hostilities or attacks, air and sea communications would need to be passed through Micronesia. By taking control of these communication ways, the United States could effectively protect itself against any potential Pacific standoff.

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<sup>97</sup> United Nations ESCAP, “Climate change and migration in the Pacific,” *United Nations Publication*. 2014.

Secondly, the continued American presence signified the ideological dominance of Western ideals and values in the region. To many scholars and historians, the 20th Century is marked as the “American Century” in which the United States solidified its global hegemonic world power. During the Cold War, this power was solidified in an effort to “maintain strong economic, political, and military presence in the Pacific.”<sup>98</sup> Alongside the quest for ideological leverage against the Soviets, the United States was very much concerned with its image as an international powerhouse. Though the US had received international backlash and negative publicity regarding its nuclear testing in the Pacific, it still wanted to be respected as a global superpower and champion of human rights.

Throughout the Cold War, the United States looked to advance this ideological hegemony in the Pacific in multiple ways. In the 1960s, President Kennedy proclaimed his desire to further incorporate the Trusteeship into the United States because of the economic interests of maintaining control of the shipping region.<sup>99</sup> As the Marshallese pressed the United States administration for more local autonomy and recognition, however, the US had to adapt their strategy so as to avoid appearing as a total colonial power in the region. By the 1980s, the United States looked to rebrand their imperial control over Micronesia through the Compact of Free Association--a bilateral agreement that recognized the Marshall Islands as a state in “close association” with the United States.

### **Preserving Imperial Legacies: Adapting the Compact of Free Association**

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<sup>98</sup> United Nations ESCAP, “Climate change and migration in the Pacific,” *United Nations Publication*, 2014.

<sup>99</sup> Ballendorf, Dirk Anthony, “The new freely-associated states of Micronesia: their natural and social environmental challenges.” *GeoJournal*, vol. 16, no. 2, pp. 137–142. 1988,

In 1986, the Marshallese community leaders signed the Compact of Free Association with the United States. The Compact marked the formal end to the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, and granted apparent independence to the Marshall Islands. The Compact of Free Association is the equivalent of a treaty--it represents a negotiation with the United States on the revocable political independence of Micronesia.<sup>100</sup> Officially, the islands were labelled as a Freely Associated State that the United States had “the obligation to keep in a close relation” with itself. The Compact--though forged with the outward attempt to grant the Marshall Islands full autonomy and sovereignty over their land-- reinstated existing American imperial power in the region. At a time of heightened Cold War competition between the United States and the Soviet Union, the United States wanted a way to continue their presence in the Pacific informally so as to avoid appearing as a colonial presence in the region. Additionally, the United States found it more cost effective to carry out its interests through the Compact rather than full-out institutional oversight through the TTPI.<sup>101</sup>

While the Compact of Free Association was meant to give more autonomy to the Marshallese people, many scholars view the move to make the Marshall Islands a "Freely Associated State" as a thinly-veiled attempt at reinforcing American imperial control over the islands. Michael Walsh describes how the United States continues to use language in formal documents to indicate that these islands are still not sovereign. In the Department of Defense's 2018 report, the US classified the “Marshall Islands” under “US / US Territories.”<sup>102</sup> Pacific scholar Emily Mitchell-Eaton explains how the shift towards the Compact Agreement also

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<sup>100</sup> Ballendorf, Dirk Anthony, “The new freely-associated states of micronesia: their natural and social environmental challenges.” *GeoJournal*, vol. 16, no. 2, pp. 137–142. 1988,

<sup>101</sup> Walsh, Michael Edward, “The sovereignty of freely associated states in the indo pacific,” *The Islands Society*, 10 June 2019.

<sup>102</sup> Walsh, Michael Edward, “The sovereignty of freely associated states in the indo pacific,” *The Islands Society*, 10 June 2019.

solidified an American geographic imagination that extended its reach across the Pacific.<sup>103</sup> This American imagined community was very much militaristic in nature--while the US wanted to incorporate the Marshall Islands as a military holding, it was reluctant to fully advocate for the protection of Marshallese human rights and agency. This is evident in the US's inadequate means of addressing Marshallese economic and migratory distress.

The Compact of Free Association referenced the relationship that the US would have with the Marshall Islands in regards to economic aid. In 1988, the Marshallese government established the Nuclear Claims Tribunal, which allowed the Marshallese to demand compensation for the abuses they suffered under the US nuclear testing. However, this compensation has in no way been sufficient. The tribunal concluded the United States should pay \$2.3 billion in reparations, but Congress and US courts have refused. Documents show the US paid just \$4 million.<sup>104</sup> By 2009, The Nuclear Claims Tribunal had completely exhausted its funding from the US government. By this time, over half of the valid claimants had died waiting to receive any sort of compensation from the US Government.<sup>105</sup> Congress has no intention of refilling the fund for the affected Marshallese, and has resisted external pressures to carry out their commitment to assist the islanders.

Because of the US's dominance within the United Nations, the UN has done next to nothing to hold the US accountable for its actions in the Marshall Islands even though the case of the nuclear testing in the Pacific constitutes as abuse of the human and environmental rights of

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<sup>103</sup>Mitchell-Eaton, "New destinations of empire: imperial migration from the marshall islands to northwest arkansas," *Syracuse University*, 2016

<sup>104</sup>Rust, Suzanne, "How the us betrayed the marshall islands, kindling the next nuclear disaster," *LA Times*, 10 Nov 2019.

<sup>105</sup>Gorgenson, Timothy, "Bikini islanders still deal with fallout from nuclear tests," *The Conversation*, 29 June. 2016.

the Marshallese.<sup>106</sup> In turn, as they are unable to make their claim for refugee status through the United Nations, the Compact of Free Association has become the only resource available to the Marshallese. Quite significantly, the Compact lays out specific clauses regarding the right of the Marshallese to migrate to the United States. Under the Compact, Marshall Islanders can travel and work in the United States without obtaining visas.<sup>107</sup> However, while they can legally work in the US, the Marshallese have to go through the same naturalization process as other regular migrants--there is no special program for them to obtain full legal status. As per the Compact Agreement, social security taxes are removed from their paychecks, but as a consequence, Marshallese immigrants in the US can never receive social security or Medicaid.<sup>108</sup> Likewise, Compact immigrants, unless they go through the regular naturalization process, can never participate in American politics. These obstacles remain particularly problematic for poor Marshallese immigrants who have lasting health problems relating to exposure to nuclear fallout; many of these communities have higher rates of thyroid cancer and leukemia.<sup>109</sup>

Mitchell-Eaton argues that this relationship denotes the Marshallese to an *imperial migrant* status that deprives Marshallese of certain services in the US. To Mitchell-Eaton, the Compact imposes an imperial identity upon the Marshallese and subjects them to a loss of their indigeneity and agency. Had the Marshallese been able to claim official refugee status through the UN refugee regime, they would have enjoyed expedited green-card processing and greater access to social benefits within the United States. These benefits were not awarded to the Marshallese because the refugee system prioritizes political interests over true humanitarian

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<sup>106</sup> Smith-Norris, Martha, "Negotiating a cold war treaty: the united states, the marshall islands, and the compact of free association." *Domination and Resistance: The United States and the Marshall Islands during the Cold War*,. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2016.

<sup>107</sup> Froelich, Jacqueline. 'Marshallese'. *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas*. CALS. 29 July 2019.

<sup>108</sup> Froelich, Jacqueline, 'Marshallese,' *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas*, CALS, 29 July 2019.

<sup>109</sup> Froelich, Jacqueline, 'Marshallese', *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas*, CALS, 29 July 2019.

need. The UN refugee system fails to protect the most vulnerable individuals from environmental violence and thereby forces them into unequal migratory relationships like the one established under the Compact of Free Association.

### **Conclusion and Ways Forward**

By understanding the legacies of the American interest in the TTPI, we can begin to understand the claim that “historical precedent of U.S. colonial power in the Pacific region has carved out grooves—institutionally, territorially, culturally, even in the landscape itself—that have enabled new permutations of empire, both in the Pacific and around the world.”<sup>110</sup> The Marshall Islands can give us a broader understanding of the fundamental flaws of the United Nations human rights regime. The politicization of the UN’s human rights framework stems from the creation of the UN itself as the organization reinforcing state-centric models of governance. The structure of the UN gave significant power to P5 members, who had the power to determine the status of “states” and “dependent territories.” Likewise, the UN gave power to these nations to determine the missions of human rights doctrine and programs, through which they could carry out their own interests. As the US took control of the Marshall Trust Territory, the United States has systematically contorted its mission as a guardian of the Pacific islands to carry out its military, economic, and political endeavors.

By putting the Marshallese people under the control of the American military, not only were the Marshallese denied autonomy, they were also subject to human rights abuses that had lasting effects on their health and societal wellbeing. The case of the Marshall Islands

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<sup>110</sup> Smith-Norris, Martha, "Negotiating a cold war treaty: the united states, the marshall islands, and the compact of free association." *Domination and Resistance: The United States and the Marshall Islands during the Cold War.*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2016.

exemplifies the abuse of United Nations powers in multiple ways. Firstly, the legal denial of sovereignty under the UN trusteeship framework inhibited the Marshallese from developing their own self-sufficient political autonomy. The trusteeship granted the full custodial rights of the land to the United States, which in turn controlled the economic, political, and environmental status of the territory. The American guardianship over Marshallese lands allowed the US to raze entire islands through nuclear testing and forcefully remove indigenous populations from their ancestral homes. This relocation of the Marshallese people by the American military was done with little respect to the ecological functions of these islands, which resulted in the near-starvation of entire island populations. The United Nations rejected the Marshallese's complaint against the American trusteeship and allowed the United States to continue its nuclear program, despite clear evidence that the human rights of the Marshallese were abused. Systematically, the United States fostered conditions that progressively made the Marshall Islands uninhabitable and forced increasingly desperate individuals to migrate. Despite these clear abuses, the Marshallese are excluded from the UN human rights regime because neo-colonial arrangements made their plight a matter of internal US affairs, and the United States--as one of the P5 countries--is not subject to UN scrutiny.

The Compact of Free Association established an alternative form of migration that allowed the US to deny access to certain benefits that would have been mandated under refugee status. Though the United States arguably fostered the conditions forcing Marshallese to migrate under its administration, it has systematically denied them access to social services and funding for necessary health care. The Compact itself was dually driven by a Marshallese desire for full independence and sovereignty, as well as an American desire to upkeep its hegemonic control in the Pacific. Though outwardly created with the intent to grant Marshallese independence, the

Compact of Free Association still does not fully recognize the Marshall Islands as an independent nation. The continued administrative claim over the islands signifies the imperial control that the United States has over the region, and the lack of international attention devoted to the infringement of sovereignty committed by the US. By allowing migration of the Marshallese on the basis of imperial identity, the US government created a system in which the Marshallese did not have any access to social services or medical benefits. With the Compact, the US could circumvent the humanitarian obligation it had towards the Marshallese while also maintaining its image as a champion of universal human rights.

Ultimately, what we consider worthy of humanitarian action is entirely contingent on politicized Western notions of humanitarian causes. This creates significant problems when we look at possible international solutions to massive global humanitarian crises such as climate change and environmental degradation. Despite the violations of the Marshallese's human rights under American administration, these individuals do not qualify for asylum under the UN definition. This is due to the political intent of the Refugee Convention at its founding. Because the definition of asylum was drawn with political interests in mind rather than a humanitarian intent, Refugee status is solely limited to those fleeing political persecution. At the inception of the 1951 Refugee Convention, Western Powers had no interest in resettling refugees fleeing the conditions of their extractive colonialism rule--their focus was mainly confined to Western-sympathizing individuals fleeing Soviet persecution. The preferential status of Hungarian Refugees in the 1950s and El Salvadoran Refugees in the 1980s exemplifies this political focus. To global powers, refugees were objects of power politics, not individuals with a legitimate claim to humanitarian assistance.

However, while the case of the Marshall Islands highlights a fundamental flaw in the current human rights regime, it does not mean that this system cannot be adapted to better address current humanitarian issues. The existing refugee regime represents an overwhelming emphasis on the political aspects of human rights. In order to make substantial change to the limited UN framework, we must adapt the parameters of the refugee convention to incorporate those fleeing economic and environmental disasters, as well as socio-political neglect from colonial legacies. Recent discursive change in the UNFCCC's 2015 Paris Accords in fact suggests that the prospect of a new global migration system that includes those fleeing environmental forces may not be a far-fetched dream despite the imperial origins of the UN refugee regime. The Accords themselves noted the small island nations in the Pacific as particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change and proposed the creation of an international body specifically dedicated to dealing with climate change displacement. Much of the headway for these legislative adaptations has come from Pacific island representatives themselves and indicate these island nations' diplomatic success. Having forums and working groups that amplify the voices of small, "developing" nations in the UN can help us amend problematic and insufficient human rights legislation. Currently, we are not dealing with the same global order that shaped Human Rights doctrine in the 1940s and '50s. While obviously there still remains stark power inequalities among nations, the change that we see in the Paris Accords could indicate the growing strength of post-colonial, small island states in an international system dominated by hegemonic powers.

The case of the Marshall Islands represents one of a widely-ignored and institutionalized "slow violence" that is derived from both environmental and social marginalization. These forms of humanitarian abuses are often removed from our larger human rights discussions because they

require a nuanced understanding of imperial legacies. In a much similar vein, the Pacific's wider experience with climate change and environmental degradation can be understood as a product of this slow violence. Having their experience realized in international negotiation bodies represents a reframing of the institutional and historical violence they continue to face as a result of climate change.

The diplomatic change that we see in regards to the Pacific in turn took place because of unique and powerful performative strategies by Pacific climate activists. Their cohesive identity construction through media narratives surrounding climate change has allowed for such an unprecedented success in the UN's climate change proceedings. By looking into how the Pacific delegations and media organizations have translated their experience with slow environmental violence into international media spectacles, we can begin to understand the significance of their activist frameworks.

## **Chapter 2: Spectacles and Slow Violence**

I initially undertook this thesis project with the intent to explore the political ramifications of entire island nations sinking beneath the ocean. It seemed like a myth--a tragic tale of a modern Atlantis slipping away from existence forever, only to be remembered in painful retellings of warm childhood afternoons spent snacking on dishes of coconut and *pulaka* and fishing in the lagoon. The images of pristine coastlines and crystal clear waters added to the mournful tragedy of it all; it seemed so cruel that the most beautiful, most innocent nations in the world would be the first to perish at the hands of human-induced climate change. The Pacific islands would be the first martyrs of the modern environmental crisis, and what would be left to show for it? How incredibly puzzling of a situation it would leave the UN, who would eventually be tasked with deciding the future of Pacific cultures, migration and citizenship.

I now realize the reason I and many other researchers have been so intrigued by this subject is the result of the persuasive media messaging on the Pacific. This question of what to do with the "sinking islands"--a phrase that is widely used and accepted even in international policy forums--is very much a misnomer. No, the Pacific Islands are not sinking. The water is in fact, rising around them. Climate change in the Pacific is multi-faceted and not as simple as a matter of land slipping beneath the ocean, but complexity is not what gets people clicking on news articles. Whether or not these media narratives are scientifically accurate is entirely beside the point. They did their job, and they did it well--they demanded the attention of international audiences to the environmental violence and injustice that Pacific communities face on a daily basis. I am proof of the success of such a narrative.

The question that then emerges is *how* have these narratives been so successful, and who is behind it all? Pacific activists and media organizations have fought for recognition in a world that so often overlooks structural violence against marginalized communities. The unbalanced nature of our international negotiation forums means that the issues concerning industrialized nations oftentimes stunts the progress of any grassroots environmental movements. The notable success of this media and political campaign is a feat that deserves to be recognized and examined in broader context. In this chapter, I will argue that media preference towards spectacular imagery does not detract from environmentalism in the Pacific, but rather activists have creatively and carefully dramatized narratives of environmental violence into consumable and eye-catching, grandiose spectacles. Instead of allowing the slow and historical environmental violence inflicted on Pacific communities to fade into obscurity, tenacious Pacific activists have effectively flipped the script of slow violence inflicted on their community into a dramatic ballad of media stunts and images. The approach of Pacific island activists prioritizes agency and rigor over the submissive position they have been forced into in international accords and traditional negotiation.

These spectacular Pacific media narratives exist in an international space that is increasingly cognizant of structural violence and has helped draw attention to the linkages between social and economic rights with the global threats of climate change. Over the last twenty years, climate science has in turn experienced a “triumphant rise to political saliency”<sup>111</sup> and has provided a space to voice the concerns of communities affected by environmental degradation and change.<sup>112</sup> For centuries, many colonial and post-colonial states have

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<sup>111</sup> Mike Hulme & Martin Mahoney, “Climate change: what do we know about the IPCC?” *Political Geography, University of East Anglia*, 12 April 2010.

<sup>112</sup> Etienne Pigue, “From “primitive migration” to “climate refugees”: the curious fate of the natural environment”. *Association of American Geographers*. 18 July 2012.

experienced threats to their environmental and social wellbeing. However, this type of long-term, systematic violence is something that has been largely overlooked in international media contexts. Quite simply, the slow, structural violence faced by former colonial subjects was not as a concern to international media because it is not as sudden, “flashy,” or consumable as other human rights abuses. This attentional bias towards “spectacular” instances of violence has created an unequal response in international support and has limited the platform for victims and advocates to voice their experience with violence and human rights abuses.

In order to bring “mundane” environmental inequalities to a level of true political saliency, Pacific activists have undertaken a transformative media overhaul that has reimagined environmental issues as inherently political. In order to demand action from governments at the helm of international climate diplomacy, climate activists have formed networks of support on the basis of a shared, common identity. Through these networks, activists have promoted Pacific environmental values and interests through eye-catching, innovative media campaigns and stunts that capture the attention of international onlookers. Strategically employing a “spectacle” of intriguing language, visuals, and dramatics, Pacific island activists have harnessed the power of their situation into bargaining power on the world stage. Through both a coalition of state and non-state actors, Pacific networks of support have changed global perspectives on the prospect of climate change realities and diplomacy and have forced us to reexamine what it means to be the “victim” of climate change.

### **Environmentalism of the Poor**

There are many explanations as to why environmental abuses have not been awarded an adequate examination in our contemporary media frameworks. Rob Nixon’s *Slow Violence and*

*the Environmentalism of the Poor* argues that environmental forms of violence have not shared the same political leverage and outcry of many other human rights abuses because they occur over a larger time frame and require a much more nuanced explanation as to their origins. Talking about structural, colonial, and environmental oppressions are not well received in media frameworks because they are not as easily consumable as other violences. They simply do not fit into a media world driven by clicks, shares, retweets, and hasty snippets of airtime on news networks. While large, sudden human rights abuses send shockwaves across the world, the creeping threats of climate change and environmental degradation make little headway in media spaces. The attentional biases of media sources prioritize these spectacular cases of violence and destruction over slower structural causes of destruction.

#### *Slow violence in the Marshalls*

The Marshall Islands are an example of what Rob Nixon would describe as the victims of slow, everyday violence. Long past the official “end” to the US nuclear campaign in the region, the Marshallese are still suffering from the colonial violence that irreversibly altered the environmental foundation of their homeland and has forced them into an unequal political and migratory relationship with their former colonizer. Though subjects of a gruesome nuclear campaign, the Marshallese victims are not remembered in the same solemn way as those who suffered from the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Because the trauma suffered by the Marshallese was not spectacular or instantaneous enough to become entrenched in our historical memory and pop culture, it would fade into the margins of textbooks and slowly disappear into the folds of history. Slow violence is the silent killer of international sympathy

and recognition--its victims do not go out in a celebratory funeral of canons and parades, but rather in a whisper.

Western human rights discourse leaves little room for nuanced discussions of the legacies of colonial empires and the systematic violence that they have inflicted on the Global South. The case of the Marshall Islands is exemplary of the entrenched slow violence of history that has permeated past the historical “end” of imperialism and into modern inter-state dynamics. Yet, the Marshall Islands are not unique within the Pacific region in their struggles against the slow violence of enviro-imperialism. In Nauru, the hyper-extraction of phosphate under German occupation has left the island nation economically dependent on an immigration deal with Australia, and has rendered its government unable to support its increasingly urbanized population. These same systems of environmental depletion have replicated themselves throughout many former colonies and have created similar unequal relationships between former colonies and their respective imperial abusers.

Another destructive quality of colonialism and its legacies is that it expands vastly over time and geography. Because oftentimes these abuses occur very far off from the political centers of empires, they can be neglected and ignored. The outsourcing of environmental crises maintains the economic and social status quo in the global order. If environmental crises are something that can be nearly entirely ignored or distanced from the decision-making core of international organizations, then the pressure for change is unrealized. Western conservation ethics views environmental crisis as something entirely experienced by the Global South, and something that solely affects those outside of the “privileged center” of politics. As critical geographer Natalie Koch demonstrates in her work in the Aral region of Kazakhstan, environmental degradation and violence typically concern the most marginalized in society.

“Calling attention to cases of environmental injustice is a strong focus in critical social science research, but for many other actors, especially journalists and politicians, these more mundane geographies are easily overwritten by sensational issues, such as election results or territorial conflict.”<sup>113</sup> The nature of slow structural violence is often unspectacular, though slow environmental violence is nonetheless politically salient.

This conceptualization of distance allows for a sense of apathy and fatalism to prevail regarding the creation of any sort of reparative justice. As Koch argues, “fatalism relinquishes both the individual and governmental responsibility for finding a positive path forward,” thereby hindering the work of justice-oriented activists.<sup>114</sup> Attentional biases in regards to climate change have a significant effect on support for potential climate mitigation projects and undertakings. The media frameworks surrounding climate change have typically excluded socio-political interpretations of the effects of a changing climate, and therefore have shaped our fundamental understanding of environmentalism.<sup>115</sup> The case of the Pacific Islands brings the environmental and political understanding of domestic and global structural inequalities into a clear view.

### *Climate Justice--A Media Approach*

If, as Rob Nixon described, our society is not conducive to productive discussions on structural violence, then why now do we see increased attention towards environmental justice? Though the sense of apathy and fatalism prevail over international policy forums on climate change, many Global South activists have undertaken a political and media approach—the

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<sup>113</sup> Koch, Natalie, “The geopolitics of spectacle,” *Cornell University Press*, 2018.

<sup>114</sup> Koch, Natalie, “The geopolitics of spectacle,” *Cornell University Press*, 2018.

<sup>115</sup> Yu, Luo and Zhao, Jaiying. “Motivated attention in climate change perception and action,” *Environmental Psychology*, 16 July 2019.

approach of climate justice—that prioritizes justice for those marginalized by environmental colonialism.

Climate justice primarily argues that the impacts of human-induced climate change are not limited to political or environmental effects, but rather directly affect the human rights of individuals and communities worldwide. Climate justice attests that the world’s most vulnerable populations will be at the frontlines of climate change and that they deserve protection of their human rights under certain human rights agreements such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Because these populations are often marginalized and post-colonial, the protection that they deserve is to be drawn from the power of industrialized political powers. This demand represents a commitment to colonial reparations as well as environmental justice.

Climate justice frameworks have largely been adopted by nations in the Global South as a means to describe their experiences with colonialism. Much of the environmental conditions (such as natural resource depletion, urbanization, and other socio-enviro factors) have been heavily affected by historic colonial presence, and have also shaped the current external relations of these nations. Climate justice also looks to “shift the burden” of climate change adaptation and mitigation efforts by putting the responsibility onto “developed” nations that have contributed the most heavily to climate change. In the case of the Pacific islands especially, climate justice would naturally support the claim to colonial reparations. International climate justice is an anti-colonial movement that looks to promote the interests of those directly affected by climate change.<sup>116</sup> This compelling mindset shaped the goals and missions of prominent Pacific activists, especially those from the non-governmental sector.

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<sup>116</sup> Schloseberg, David, “Discourse of environmental justice.” *Australian Research Centerr*. 2014

## Climate Warriors

The Pacific Calling Partnership (PCP) was one of the first non-governmental organizations to call attention to how global sea level rise and climate change have had specific effects on the people of Kiribati and Tuvalu. In 2004, the PCP was created as a charity-based organization to promote ecological and climate-based justice in Kiribati. As one of the pioneering forces behind the fight for human rights and dignity within the ecological movement, the PCP acted as a way to raise the voices of Pacific islanders affected by climate change and injustices. Within their media campaign, the PCP is a vocal opponent to climate change deniers and constantly demands climate action from both the Kiribati and Australian governments. The PCP focuses on providing a “human face” to climate change and its effects by promoting the stories of Pacific migrants and advocates, as well as promoting the work of climate scientists and scholars.

For i-Kiribati and Tuvaluan people, inter-regional civil society organizations like the PCP play an especially important role in their quest for meaningful environmental political change given the fact that their governments have little connection to their former colonizers. This is unlike in the case of Pacific islands in French Polynesia such as New Caledonia, which retains a strong connection to the French government (as its residents maintain French citizenship and can freely move throughout French territories). In contrast, organizations like the PCP are focused on creating connections with New Zealand and Australia to establish different opportunities for their citizens. A strong connection with these economically-powerful states would allow for a smoother transition for potential migrants to cities with more opportunities for jobs. This is an example of what former Kiribati president Anote Tong described as “migration with dignity.”<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Tong, Anote, “Charting its own course’: a paradigm shift in pacific diplomacy,” *ANU Press*, 2015

Ultimately, international connections such as these could potentially prove effective in combating migratory crises. Leading i-Kiribati expert and advocate, Maria Tiimon talks about how her experience at the PCP has shaped her ability to advocate for Pacific communities. Tiimon explains that a majority of her advocacy work as the PCP is sharing her personal experiences with climate-based migration candidly and openly with international audiences. “You have to be comfortable sharing your story again and again.”<sup>118</sup> The PCP prides itself on changing the perception and opinion of international actors by amplifying the voices of Pacific people affected by climate change. Director Jill Finnane of PCP argues that the reason so many media sources are inclined to listen to and publish stories from Pacific islanders is that media outlets ultimately look for real, candid, and emotional subjects for press releases and stories. These types of testimony not only paint an accurate and truthful account of a global issue, but also promotes an emotional story that “sells” or gains a lot of online clicks and shares. Because there is a created emotional and financial incentive for media outlets to promote stories on the effects of climate change, many more media outlets have been inclined to broadcast Pacific issues, especially leading up to and during UNFCCC Committee of Parties (COP) meetings.

While the PCP is the frontrunner for climate and environmental justice in the Pacific, many other justice-based organizations have focused their work on representing Pacific communities and their fight against climate change. Joseph Sikulu established a chapter of the global 350 organization for the Pacific region. Based in Fiji, Pacific 350 runs programming and media sessions based on the demand that global leaders keep the carbon in the atmosphere below 350 parts-per-million. As a part of 350’s media campaign, Sikulu started the Pacific Climate Warriors project that looked to engage Pacific youth in the fight against climate change. Sikulu

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<sup>118</sup> Tiimon, Maria, Author’s Interview, Sydney, Australia, Jan 2020

championed the quip “we are not drowning, we are fighting” on social media to describe the steps that Pacific activists are taking against climate change. From Kiribati to Nauru and The Solomon islands, activists chant Sikulu’s mantra standing knee-deep in the ocean while wearing traditional clothing. This campaign brilliantly produced a stark image of both the grim realities of sea level rise, as well as the strength and dignity behind indigenous activism.

The spread of these media campaigns signifies an important change in the status of global advocacy in the 21st Century. With the rise of modern social media, these types of advocacy strategies can be more effective because they can reach wider audiences across different platforms. Sikulu notably started posting relatable climate change information on the Climate Warriors’ TikTok account accompanied with a rendition of a few of the viral dances that brought the adolescent-oriented media platform to notoriety.<sup>119</sup>

### **“We are Canoes blocking Coal Ships”: Understanding Media Strategies**

The widespread use of media outlets has been successful for engaging Pacific advocates in two distinct ways. Firstly, the ability for media to bridge the large geographical divides between islands in the Pacific has led to an increased sense of identity building and sharing across Pacific nations. Secondly, this shared sense of identity has strengthened the Pacific island nations’ call to climate action through cohesive media campaigns and strategies. The use of jarring, provocative, and dramatic media strategies has effectively brought international attention to the Pacific region, and has supported the Pacific cause.

One of the key successes of the Pacific media campaign has been creating links of solidarity and reinforcing a shared sense of identity within the Pacific community.<sup>120</sup> Micronesia

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<sup>119</sup> Pacific 350, “End fracking in the northern territory.” *TikTok: Pacific 350*. 18 November 2019.

<sup>120</sup> Anderson, Benedict, “Imaginegd communities,” *The Nation*, 1983.

and the larger area of Oceania operate rather uniquely due to the geography of the region-- because the islands of Micronesia are dispersed throughout 2,000 miles of ocean, there have historically been few opportunities and spaces for building strong networks of support. The increased use of the internet and social media platforms has allowed for these communities to connect and transfer ideas.

The creation of these media networks has not only helped change the world perception of Pacific islanders and their existential fight against climate change, but it has also changed how they view themselves. No longer are they dormant, helpless victims to a rising tide. Rather, the increase in media connection has allowed Pacific activists to feel engaged and powerful in having their voices heard internationally. The power of community-based advocacy has also been transferred to Pacific leadership. Joseph Sikulu of Pacific 350 talks about the effects that social media has had on Pacific leadership and representation. “Pacific Islanders have always been at the frontline of climate change, and likewise their leaders have always been at the frontlines of climate negotiations.”<sup>121</sup>

One of the driving forces behind this call to action stems from the ties with climate inequality and global marginalization. As political geographer Natalie Koch argues, “scholars have long shown who feels these effects and where are questions inextricably tied to larger issues of social marginalization. And when marginal groups are subjected to environmental contamination, this in turn reinforces their social marginalization.”<sup>122</sup> The Pacific Islands have rallied behind the concept that they are not just small countries in the Pacific, but rather represent the marginalized communities of the world who remain the most vulnerable to climate change. These Pacific Island delegations have made this particularly salient in their Pacific Island Forum,

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<sup>121</sup> Sikulu, Joseph, “Interview with Joseph Sikulu.” *Personal Interview conducted by Author*. January 2020.

<sup>122</sup> Koch, Natalie, “The geopolitics of spectacle.” *Cornell University Press*. 2018.

going so far as to expel the Australian and New Zealand representatives from their working group due to their histories as colonial powers.<sup>123</sup> The shared experiences of environmental marginalization have helped forged connections and shape political agendas in the Pacific region. Within these networks, Pacific activists combined their voices into a new, innovative campaign for international recognition and saliency. With an element of dramatics reminiscent of day-time soap operas, the Small Pacific Island delegations have showcased their cause in eye-catching and provocative displays for international media attention.<sup>124</sup>

### **Spectacle: Something Unifying and Empowering**

In 2009, the government of Maldives hosted an “underwater” climate conference for international delegations. Clad in wetsuits, dive gear, and “pens and paper,” the delegates signed their climate negotiations on a table placed 3 meters beneath the pristine waters of the Maldives coast. As the image of fish swimming past delegates underwater drew much media attention and iconic photo ops, the message from the government of the Maldives was clear: this is the fate of island nations if we continue to ignore the need of a comprehensive climate agreement. During the meeting, the delegate from Maldives held up a slate that read “SOS” to the plethora of TV news cameras.<sup>125</sup> “We have to get the message across by being more imaginative, more creative and so this is what we are doing” said Maldives President Nasheed.

As theatrical as President Nasheed’s conference may be, it emphasized an important tactic in getting the message of the Pacific islands across. Our current media epoch has been shaped inherently by globalized connection. The importance of our consumption of images is not

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<sup>123</sup>Taylor, Meg, “Securing the future of our blue Pacific.” *Pacific Island Secretariat*. n.d.

<sup>124</sup> Omidi, Maryam, “Maldives sends climate SOS with undersea cabinet” *Reuters*, 17 October 2019.

<sup>125</sup> Omidi, Maryam, “Maldives sends climate SOS with undersea cabinet” *Reuters*, 17 October 2019.

necessarily the image or content itself, it is the representations of these images that form their value.<sup>126</sup> The spectacle image--one that takes on its own life--is only as strong as our reception of its narratives. A spectacle is an event that relies on “un-anticipated novelty” and “pure singularity,” something that breaks the cycle of our typical news channels and stuffy political discursive circles.

A testament to their spectacular nature, these media narratives dictate how political agendas shift their focus. One of the more recent examples of such a spectacular media narrative has been the coverage of the Runit Dome on Enewetak atoll in the Marshall Islands. The concrete Dome--a painful living souvenir of the American nuclear legacy in the Marshalls--was built to cap layers of highly radioactive nuclear waste on the island following the US military tests. A November 2019 LA times piece detailing the dome’s slow collapse and subsequent nuclear leakage have come to light, the structure has come to symbolize the environmental and nuclear violence that the Marshallese have suffered at the hands of American forces.<sup>127</sup> The image of an American “nuclear time bomb” in the Pacific has taken on a life of its own and has transmitted the call for colonial and climate justice to audiences worldwide. .

The combining of images of climate change and nuclear histories into once heart-stopping, unforgettable symbol of a “nuclear timebomb” inflicts the need to act onto politicians. In such a consumable manner, these bite-sized images can easily spread across mainstream audiences, and churn responses from members of civil society. Following the LA Times report, a flurry of tweets ensued demanding that more be done about combating climate change and

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<sup>126</sup> Magnusson, Bruce, and Zahi Zalloua, "Introduction: from events to spectacles," *Spectacle*, 2016.

<sup>127</sup> Rust, Suzanne, “How the U.S. betrayed the Marshall Islands, kindling the next nuclear disaster,” *Los Angeles Times*, 10 November 2019.

creating alternatives for Pacific Islanders effectively torn from their homes due to global sea level rise. The extent of a media spectacle's spread is intertwined with its ability to force action from lawmakers and diplomatic representatives; the more easily people emotionally identify with an image or narrative, the more passionate they will be in advocating for that particular cause.

Critics of the use of spectacle argue that the use of dramatics in international media sources is counterintuitive to the mission of Pacific advocates. In an era of “fake news,” these media spectacles run a fine line of being considered too “dramatic” or “unscientific” to be considered legitimate. There is also a danger of relying on these extravagant narratives: the subjecting of spectacle to common sense erodes it into a sense of normalcy, and exhausts its potency in media outlets.<sup>128</sup> By evaluating something as dramatic as an underwater climate conference in relation to conflicting scientific facts, the spectacle fails to receive adequate respect and thus loses its mesmerizing charm. The reliance on spectacular imagery and widespread grassroots media threatens journalistic integrity and puts us in an unhealthy situation where a consumable media bite replaces full-course scientific analysis. Likewise, the prioritizing of dramatics over scientific accuracy can breed mystification, orientalism, and in some cases infantilization of actors. In the Pacific media outlets, this has resulted in many Pacific islanders being portrayed as helpless, hopeless victims to a rising tide. The notion of “sinking islands”—while successful in turning heads—can project an image of passivity and helplessness to the world. Spectacular images are immensely captivating and alluring to international audiences, however they can potentially be harmful to social movements.

## **Conclusion**

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<sup>128</sup> Magnusson, Bruce, and Zahi Zalloua, "Introduction: from events to spectacle," *Spectacle*, 2016.

The cries of victims of colonial violence have historically fallen on apathetic ears. In our own interpretations of human rights advocacy, instances of colonial damage and structural inequalities have long been disregarded in favor of short, consumable accounts of the “spectacular.” Though the discipline of Human Rights Studies has been around for over 70 years, we are now only beginning to examine the relation between colonial extraction, the environment, and human rights abuses. While the qualms of “slow violence” have historically been ignored in international media spaces, new changes in the perception of these human rights abuses have begun to bring new attention to these violent structures.

Thanks to the creative work of many Pacific activists, the effects and violences of climate change are much more understandable. The crash of waves now elicits the same intrigue as the burst of bombs or the fire of missiles. We as international audience members only have the capacity to empathize and act on behalf of concepts we believe we understand. By reimagining climate change and colonial violence into media spectacles, Pacific activists flipped Rob Nixon’s interpretation of slow violence. Effectively, these Pacific agents countered the typical apathetic response reserved for victims of slow, environmental violence by making their oppression consumable and emotional. By translating their situation into unforgettable media bites, these advocates could better harness the potential energy of civil society and mainstream audiences in demanding diplomatic actions from country representatives.

However, there is a second step for how these spectacles make physical change in international negotiation spaces. While spectacles are inherently eye-catching and emotional, they must be successfully transformed into policy by diplomats. This “translation” of media hype into diplomatic agendas is key to understanding exactly how certain narratives can shape the outcome of large conventions such as the Paris Accords. In the case of Pacific climate

diplomacy, these spectacular narratives were crucial in making heads turn in the United Nations. These emotional media spectacles effectively made for emotional diplomatic performances that brought about unprecedented change in the UNFCCC meetings. By rejecting the norms of formal, professional debate, these emotional performers were received in a uniquely open way, and had lasting effects on the outcome of these climate change conferences. In the next chapter, I will explore exactly why emotions are so transformative in typical debate, and how--through institutional change--these emotional performances came to be.

### **Chapter 3: Breaking Diplomacy**

“Madam President, this is not an ego trip.”

A man clad in a pale-blue dress shirt with a flower wreath draped over his shoulders huddles meekly over the microphone attached to his desk. Peering over his wide-rimmed glasses, he makes eye contact with the sitting president of the Copenhagen COP 19 meeting, Connie Hedegaard, as he continues to speak. “We have had our proposal on the table for 6 months--it is ironic that the fate of the world lies in the hands of the United States congress.” After brazenly criticizing President Obama’s reception of the Nobel Peace Prize, he dives into his frustration with the lack of progress made throughout the Committee of Parties climate meeting.

“The fate of my country rests in your hands.” The voice of Ian Fry, the Tuvalan delegate at COP 19, began to crack. “We are not Naive.” His neighbors uncomfortably shifted in their seats as his streaming tears became more visible. “I woke up this morning and I was crying, and that is not an easy thing for a grown man to admit.”<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Fry, Ian, “Performance at UNFCCC—Copenhagen”, *UNFCCC*, 2009.

The dramatics of Ian Fry's performance made news headlines worldwide. Reporters and journalists were stunned at the unprecedented display of emotion in the UNFCCC negotiation table. Some reporters ran with the prospect of a catchy headline, claiming witness to an emotional battlefield, or a "diplomatic screaming match" at the COP meeting. While headlines ranged in the severity of the interaction, reporters could not get enough of Fry's performance. A professional male to openly show vulnerability and emotion at such an incredibly important debate was such a shock to the international community. Despite differing reports of the events at the COP, the increased media attention proved helpful for raising the Pacific island environmental agenda.

The "success" of Pacific island media narratives was forged into the Paris Accords by a coalition of institutional amendments and alternative diplomatic strategies that challenged traditional norms of debate. The definitive agent of change in the UNFCCC was the Pacific delegation's strategic wielding of powerful emotional testimony. As we examine the writings of Carol Farbotko and Dominique Moïsi, we begin to understand that emotions hold a particularly poignant and eruptive nature that demand movement in debate. Emotions challenge the very nature of Western debate--their raw and uncomfortable implementation overhaul typical procedures and deeply affect their audience.

To many researchers, the question of the diplomatic success of the Pacific island states forms a sort-of "structuralist paradox" in the UNFCCC, where countries with lower GDPs and regional significance--that is, the structurally weak countries--collectively made significant strides to create an entire diplomatic body to advocate for their interests. However, this paradox can be explained through a powerful collective injection of emotional performances into UNFCCC meetings. In order to bring about this unprecedented change, the Pacific delegates

significantly re-structured climate-change negotiations in a way that better served them and their positions. By stripping the UN debate platform of its typical unfair, power-based structure, and integrating civil society voices directly into negotiations, these Pacific advocates set the stage for their effective, tear-jerking drama. This structural remodeling made it possible for skilled diplomats to inject emotional performances that “broke” norms of debate.

This chapter will examine how spectacular images have been translated and used in UN negotiations to bring about meaningful action. In this regard, I will demonstrate the particularly powerful role emotions play in diplomacy, and how emotional performances have the capacity to shift debates in favor of those at a structural disadvantage. Diplomatic performances are not simply a one-sided attempt to push legislation forward, but rather are multifaceted displays that shape national perceptions, identities, and values in international spaces. This analysis will begin with a brief background into some key structural shifts that allowed for the integration of emotional testimony into climate negotiations--namely the inception of the UNFCCC itself and its later integration of civil society actors and organizations. These key events helped create a more equitable platform that allowed for the emotional and spectacular performances to have a significantly strong effect on the outcome of debate. This action is demonstrated in the adoption of “climate justice” and Pacific-related language in the Paris Accords. These spectacular media events would be nothing if it were not for the highly-strategic, skilled, pragmatic and coalition of diplomatic performances in the UN. While the spectacular media imagination of climate change has made climate justice a politically salient issue, the emotional diplomatic performances of Pacific coalitions put Pacific agendas into motion within discursive spaces.

The diplomatic upheaval of climate change negotiations took part in a few distinct ways. Firstly, the creation of the UNFCCC as a more equitable debate platform--given its 1 country-1

vote structure and periodic revision clauses--made way for smaller nations to have a greater say in convention drafting.<sup>130</sup> This structural change also allowed the incorporation of NGOs and media organizations directly into the diplomatic process within the 2009 Committee of Parties meeting in Copenhagen. This blurring of barriers between state and non-state diplomatic actors facilitated a coalition-building between Pacific activists, and helped consolidate the Pacific performance during the COP. Most importantly, the use of Pacific actors' dramatic, emotional testimony in the UNFCCC "broke" the norms of formal, emotionless debate in such a way that it forced delegates to act and adopt justice-oriented language into the climate accords.<sup>131</sup> By overhauling the traditional norms of UN debate, Pacific island climate activists demanded action in a way that could not be ignored or overlooked as slow violence movements have historically.

### **Setting the Stage: Background on the Creation of the UNFCCC**

In order to set the stage for their emotional diplomatic debut, AOSIS (Alliance of Small Island States) working group members came together to reimagine how climate change negotiations could proceed. Up until the 1990s, most climate discussions took place sporadically within the UN General Assembly (UNGA) framework.<sup>132</sup> There did not exist any sort of continuity within these environmental meetings, which meant that attempts to create any substantive climate doctrine were often derailed. At one of these early UNGA meetings--the 1992 Earth Summit--Pacific leaders congregated together to attempt to create a formal, separate

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<sup>130</sup> Calliari E., Surminski S., Mysiak J, "The politics of (and behind) the UNFCCC's loss and damage mechanism," *Climate Risk Management, Policy and Governance*. Springer. 2019.

<sup>131</sup> Spain, Anna. "Who's going to copenhagen?: the rise of civil society in international treaty-making." *The American Society of International Law*. 11 December 2009

<sup>132</sup> Calliari E., Surminski S., Mysiak J, "The politics of (and behind) the UNFCCC's loss and damage mechanism," *Climate Risk Management, Policy and Governance*. Springer. 2019.

body to be solely dedicated to negotiating carbon emissions.<sup>133</sup> Even in the early 1990s, it was apparent that climate change and rising sea levels posed a disproportionate existential threat to these low-lying nations, and this mindset drove these Pacific leaders to advocate for a new negotiation body.<sup>134</sup>

The United Nations Framework on the Convention on Climate Change, or UNFCCC, was created in 1992 as the main negotiation body for climate change agreements.<sup>135</sup> It is the UN body known for drafting the 1997 Kyoto Protocol and 2015 Paris Accords, which remain the current working agreements for global carbon emissions. The goal of the UNFCCC is to create a working document to hold nations accountable for lowering carbon emissions relative to their economic production and foster a space in which both “developed” and “developing” nations have stake in these negotiations. Member countries introduced the concept of Nationally Appropriate Mitigation Actions (NAMAs) at the 2007 COP-13 meeting in Bali, citing the need to make adjustments for developing economies.<sup>136</sup> This mentality is indicative of developing nations’ commitment to climate justice, as climate justice understands that the burden of climate adaptation must fall primarily on developed countries, as they are the most culpable for climate change and its effects. By acknowledging the disproportionate impact that developed economies have on climate change, the UNFCCC members paved the way for a more nuanced understanding of a just climate doctrine.

While molding the UNFCCC, the Pacific island delegates were mindful not to simply mimic the power-structure of the main UN body. Rather, these delegates aimed to reimagine a

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<sup>133</sup> Calliari E., Surminski S., Mysiak J, “The politics of (and behind) the UNFCCC’s loss and damage mechanism,” *Climate Risk Management, Policy and Governance*. Springer. 2019.

<sup>134</sup> N.a, “UNFCCC and Kyoto Protocol,” *Asia Pacific Adaptation Network*. Accessed 2020.

<sup>135</sup> Ramakrishna, Kilaparti, “The unfccc-history and evolutions of climate negotiations.” *Yale University Press*, January 2000

<sup>136</sup> Ramakrishna, Kilaparti, “The unfccc-history and evolutions of climate negotiations.” *Yale University Press*, January 2000

more equitable forum that better accounted for the voices of traditionally marginalized groups. The most significant aspect of the UNFCCC's debate structure is its unique 1-vote, 1-country policy.<sup>137</sup> Typically in the United Nations General Assembly, votes are dominated by the Permanent 5 (P5) that hold coveted "veto-power" over any debate or piece of legislation.<sup>138</sup> Given the power of these P5 member states--the UK, US, France, China, and Russia--oftentimes negotiations would often fall stagnant to the whims of these delegations given the divisive nature of climate negotiations. AOSIS member states knew that if climate negotiation were left to the United Nations Security Council or General Assembly forums, they would be too easily manipulated by the veto powers of P5 members and become subsequently gridlocked.<sup>139</sup>

Given the particular history of Pacific nations like the Marshall Islands and their deprivation of autonomy over land, this improvement is historically significant and salient. The equitable structure of the UNFCCC inhibits the recreation of the colonial power dynamics that were reinforced under the UNGA and UNSC framework. For the first time in the modern world order, former colonies can have the same negotiation power over their natural environment as their former colonizers. Likewise, by integrating more non-governmental voices into the UNFCCC, these actors advocated for a more decentralized, multilateral debate forum.<sup>140</sup>

The next important structural change came in 2009, when the president of the COP-15 meeting in Copenhagen flipped climate change diplomacy on its head by allowing non-governmental, civil society organizations to attend and partake in the negotiations.<sup>141</sup> The

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<sup>137</sup> N.a, "UNFCCCC and Kyoto Protocol.," *Asia Pacific Adaptation Network*. Accessed 2020.

<sup>138</sup> Ramakrishna, Kilaparti, "The unfccc-history and evolutions of climate negotiations." *Yale University Press*, January 2000

<sup>139</sup> Ramakrishna, Kilaparti, "The unfccc-history and evolutions of climate negotiations." *Yale University Press*, January 2000

<sup>140</sup> Tiimon, Maria, "Interview with Maria Tiimon," *Interview conducted by author*, Sydney, Australia, Jan 2020

<sup>141</sup> Spain, Anna. "Who's going to copenhagen?: the rise of civil society in international treaty-making." *The American Society of International Law*. 11 December 2009.

integration of NGOs into the UNFCCC was the most impactful change to the forum to date. The direct engagement with civil society helped forge coalitions between Pacific diplomats and activists from climate justice organizations. The rise of global non-governmental advocacy groups is contingent not only on the rise of media and community forming, but also on a change in the formalities of these accords.<sup>142</sup>

Under this new framework, NGOs need the support of government delegations in order to make direct comments within discussions and may seem as junior partners in climate forums.<sup>143</sup> However, many of these NGOs operate in a symbiotic relationship with a supporting government delegation--oftentimes in exchange for press coverage or media headlines, diplomats will bring up certain goals and agendas that organization members want addressed in discussions. Likewise, these NGOs have been extremely helpful in directing attention towards the work of specific diplomats and painting their work in a particularly flattering light. The significance of this coalition building lies within the increased media attention focused on diplomatic performances, and an increased connection with members of civil society. As government delegations search for potential speakers and invitees to speak in front of committee meetings, they often find themselves relying on these NGO networks to find particularly powerful and talented orators.<sup>144</sup>

The Pacific delegations at COP-15 in Copenhagen welcomed certain groundbreaking climate justice-oriented groups to sit in on many of these negotiations. While these organizations were not approached to partake in the actual negotiations themselves, their presence was

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<sup>142</sup> Spain, Anna. "Who's going to copenhagen?: the rise of civil society in international treaty-making." *The American Society of International Law*. 11 December 2009.

<sup>143</sup>Spain, Anna. "Who's going to copenhagen?: the rise of civil society in international treaty-making." *The American Society of International Law*. 11 December 2009.

<sup>144</sup> Ramakrishna, Kilaparti, "The unfccc-history and evolutions of climate negotiations." *Yale University Press*, January 2000

impactful in drawing media attention to key actors and issues. The Pacific Calling Partnership-- or PCP--is a climate justice-based organization that focuses on promoting the voices of Pacific Islanders primarily from Kiribati and Tuvalu.<sup>145</sup> As these COP meetings continued to change and evolve, Pacific leaders have repeatedly used their connection with civil society to strengthen their emotional testimony and pleas for climate action.<sup>146</sup> The coalitions formed within this integration of NGO voices have facilitated the powerful emotional performances that have in turn demanded the attention and action of international negotiators.

### **Emotion, Performance, and Power**

Performance in international spaces has multiple key functions. Diplomacy is revered to be a social “art” that representatives spend years, or even decades, to refine. Diplomats have the obligation to act as the facilitators of state power and the enactors of state identities. Diplomatic performance, therefore, has the full capacity to shape, aid, or diminish their representative state’s power in global politics.<sup>147</sup> As Farbotko argues, UN performances “charge individuals with immense responsibility for the (de)legitimizing of state claims and, simultaneously, enhances or impairs their own reputations.”<sup>148</sup> Delegates have the pressure to advocate not only for their country’s diplomatic agendas, but also to establish the reputation of their home nations through their performances. The performance of diplomats in international spaces is inherently tied into projections of state power.

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<sup>145</sup> Tiimon, Maria, “Interview with Maria Tiimon,” *Interview conducted by author*, Sydney, Australia, Jan 2020

<sup>146</sup> Tiimon, Maria, “Interview with Maria Tiimon,” *Interview conducted by author*, Sydney, Australia, Jan 2020

<sup>147</sup> Farbotko, Carol & McGregor, Helen. “Copenhagen, climate science and the emotional geographies of climate change.” *Australian Geographer*, 41:2, 159-166.

<sup>148</sup> Farbotko, Carol & McGregor, Helen. “Copenhagen, climate science and the emotional geographies of climate change.” *Australian Geographer*, 41:2, 159-166.

The pressure to perform is undoubtedly more concentrated on smaller, non-Western states. The UN debate stage functions as a Western institution that puts an undue burden on non-Western states to submit themselves to Western standards. Not only is there extra energy exerted for these nations to “pretend” to become more Western and acceptable, there is also a certain trauma and loss of identity that is also inflicted upon these delegations. There remains a powerful pressure to exhibit signs of strength and rationality within diplomatic settings, and demonstration of emotion is frowned upon. While state relations may be driven by emotion below the surface, diplomatic performances are expected to be emotionless, objective, and formal. In the case of the Pacific Islands, especially given their history as a traditionally underrepresented region in the UN, the governments’ delegates have significant power and responsibility to shape the external relations and perceptions of their home states.<sup>149</sup>

Furthermore, as Alun Jones discusses in *Performance, Emotions, and Diplomacy*, diplomatic performance shapes identity through a moral invocation to act. It establishes motive, agendas, and actions to an international audience. It is as much of a translation of culture and heritage as it is a representation of state functions. For diplomats, representing the state is an active “lived experience that exposes the challenges and vulnerabilities of personal performance through everyday political geographies.”<sup>150</sup> As such, while we typically understand diplomatic performances as inherently separate from displays of vulnerability and emotion, if states act as emotive, moralizing forces in debate, they can identify their delegation as the “moral” leaders in international negotiations. This role of “moral leadership” has often been attributed to the Pacific

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<sup>149</sup> Carter, George, “Establishing a Pacific voice in the climate change negotiations,” *The New Pacific Diplomacy*, ANU Press, 2015.

<sup>150</sup> Jones Alun, “Performance, emotions, and diplomacy in the United Nations assemblage in New York.” *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*,. pg. 2, 01 March 2018.

given their outspokenness surrounding climate change. The moral guidance forged through these state performances determines the identity of these delegations and inspires others to act.

As we begin to understand the power of emotion in diplomatic performances, we can better account for their power in diplomatic spaces. The study of “emotional geopolitics” looks to provide a more nuanced interpretation of the effect that emotion has on global politics and state relations. Emotional geopolitics was born to counter the interpretation that the most effective way for diplomats to have their agendas heard and respected is by being formal and emotionless. This emerging field of study looks to distance the understanding of global diplomacy as an inherently stoic, masculine space. By deconstructing formalities of debate and making it more accessible for human testimony and translation, these thinkers attempt to create a more egalitarian and just negotiation process.<sup>151152</sup>

This nuanced understanding of global diplomacy has begun to inform scholarship on the power of performance. “In an age of globalization,” International Relation theorist Dominique Moïsi argues, “emotions have become indispensable to grasp the complexity of the world we live in. Magnified by media focus, they both reflect and react to globalization and in turn influence geopolitics.”<sup>153</sup> Moïsi shows how modern geopolitics is characterized by a newfound “clash of emotions” that drives political interactions between states. Emotions, he argues, do much more than simply catch attention on debate stages. Rather, emotions define the very essence of state identities and interactions. In the age of globalization, when everything and everybody are continuously connected, it is important to assert one's individuality; to make a memorable

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<sup>151</sup> Farbotko, Carol & McGregor, Helen. “Copenhagen, climate science and the emotional geographies of climate change.” *Australian Geographer*, 41:2, 159-166.

<sup>152</sup> Jones Alun, “Performance, emotions, and diplomacy in the united nations assemblage in new york.” *Annals of the American Association off Geographers*,. pg. 2, 01 March 2018.

<sup>153</sup> Moisi, Dominique, “The geopolitics of emotion: how cultures of fear, humiliation, and hope are shaping the world.” Pg. 9, *Penguin Random House*, 2015.

performance is to demand respect and establish notoriety among peers. Emotive performances by state delegations tell global audiences: “I am unique, I am different, and, if necessary, I am willing to fight until you recognize my existence.”<sup>154</sup> Emotions ultimately define states in relation to their respective position in global geopolitics.

The fight for recognition is a dynamic one. Scholar Carol Farbotko’s theory of emotional performance can explain how spontaneous emotional performances are so well received in the UN. Beyond their capabilities in making heads turn in the United Nations, emotions are powerful and syncretic enough to force change in negotiations. Farbotko argues, “Possibilities for change arise when emotions enter the climate change decision making process, even though these areas are spaces that privilege rational exchange.”<sup>155</sup> Emotions in diplomacy are often unexpectedly powerful. Emotions affect everything in their path; oftentimes they are not contained within a particular context or audience, but disperse through the retellings and sharing of stories.

Emotions make subjects personal and irrevocable--their real significance is that they affect audiences deeply and permanently. One of the unique qualities of emotions is that they are not confined to the spaces in which they occur, but rather expand and affect changing audiences. Emotions and spectacles live long past their initial context. Twenty years from now, little will be remembered on how elegant, rational, and poised diplomats spoke on the prospect of climate change action. Hardly anyone will discuss the commonplace pleasantries and professional demeanor. However, the feelings evoked from witnessing an underwater conference or grown men weeping on the debate floor can never be taken away. Those feelings and memories will forever be connected with the painful realities of a changing climate and shaped perspectives of

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<sup>154</sup> Moisi, Dominique, “The geopolitics of emotion: how cultures of fear, humiliation, and hope are shaping the world,” Pg. 13, *Penguin Random House*, 2015.

<sup>155</sup> Moisi, Dominique, “The geopolitics of emotion: how cultures of fear, humiliation, and hope are shaping the world,” *Penguin Random House*, 2015.

global leaders. These emotional moments irreversibly alter the memories and discourses of climate change in a way that propels these agendas forward.

In the following subsections, I will illustrate the above theoretical points by first examining the historical underpinnings of the norm of emotionless debate and how it has come to shape international diplomacy. Then, I will describe how the injection of emotion into the Pacific delegation's diplomatic performances effectively "broke" these norms and threw off the traditional course of climate discussions. This rupture of "typical" debate procedure is the most powerful element of the Pacific's quest to get their climate justice agenda recognized and realized into meaningful diplomatic action within the UNFCCC.

#### *Traditions of Emotionless Debate--Unequal Burdens of Western Hegemony*

Political theorists Kay Anderson and Susan Smith advance the argument that the logics of rationality and efficiency depend on the silencing of emotions. "Emotional relations tend to be regarded as something apart [...] as something that is essentially private, and does not substantially infuse the public/policy sphere."<sup>156</sup> According to proponents of rational exchange, diplomatic norms are supposedly sacred. Debate stages are understood to be emotionless, frigid spaces. The United Nations is an international negotiation body predicated on informed, rational, and hence masculine discourse rather than feminine emotional dramatics. Its actors are expected to uphold certain professional customs when presenting in public debate.

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<sup>156</sup> Anderson, K. & Smith, S, 'Editorial: emotional geographies', transactions of the institute of british geographers.' *Institute for Cultures and Society*. 2001.

Under the theory of rational exchange, diplomats are expected to uphold a separation between personal needs and requirements and those of the state.<sup>157</sup> As diplomats present themselves before onlookers, their primary duty is to adequately represent the state and perform its functions; all personal needs and desires are secondary. Emotions, on the other hand, are inherently personal. By maintaining a separation between the personal and professional in diplomacy, rational theorists argue not only for a suppression of emotions and vulnerability, but also the characteristic needs of one's self. Arguably, this adherence to emotionless rationalism has shaped the slow, professional nature of international diplomacy and has defined what we consider typical state behavior.

One key area of diplomacy that often utilizes this masculine, professional aura is the field of international trade negotiations. Trade negotiations are seen as a projection of a state's professionalism and economic capacity--they oftentimes shape the future of economic relations between states. In such settings, small Pacific island states have demonstrated the full capacity to utilize traditional norms of "professional" diplomatic discourse to advance their interests.<sup>158</sup> For example, a new economic project of countries like Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands include increasing economic relations with Indonesia and especially China.<sup>159</sup> Increasing trade with China signifies much more than an economic boost to Pacific economies. Rather, closer relations with China indicate a growing presence of Chinese influence in the region, as well as a defiance against the economic history that many Pacific states have held with the United States. Supporting China sends a clear message that these Pacific Islands are welcoming China's

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<sup>157</sup> Volker Stanzel. "New realities in foreign affairs: diplomacy in the 21st century," *German Institute of International Affairs*. 11 November 2018.

<sup>158</sup> Morgan Wesley, "Negotiating power in contemporary Pacific trade diplomacy." *ANU Press*, 2015.

<sup>159</sup> Jamie Smyth, "China aid wins influence in Pacific despite rising concerns," *Financial Times*, 13 November 2019.

increasing strategic influence in the region, while also demonstrating its autonomy from the West. Throughout the trade negotiation process, Vanuatu maintained a professional, rational demeanor with China, and in return fostered a relationship that helped boost its economic legitimacy in the region.<sup>160</sup> Pacific activists knew exactly when rational debate or emotional performances were most effective, and can change their behavior accordingly.

### *Emotional Debate -- Weeping Diplomats*

If the UN forum is predicated on rational, emotionless debate, then how seriously can we take weeping diplomats? As we examined with Ian Fry's tearful performance in Copenhagen, delegates do not always act in a "rational" manner. While the norms of UN negotiations prioritize rational discourse, these emotional displays countered our traditional understandings of masculine professionalism. They broke what we believed to be the "correct" way of performing diplomacy.

If the absence of emotion is considered "rational" and professional, then the presence of emotions is inherently *irrational*. As Moisi argues, irrational behavior of states is what propels change and action forward in international relations. The Pacific performance of irrational, emotional testimony on the UNFCCC stage is the fundamental reason why these diplomats were unexpectedly successful in advancing their climate justice agendas internationally. Ultimately, the norms of the United Nations and its debate structure uphold Western power dynamics and benefit states who have a disproportionate amount of geopolitical power. Therefore, in order for marginalized nations to have a significant effect on diplomacy, they have to do something that rejects these norms.

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<sup>160</sup> Jamie Smyth, "China aid wins influence in Pacific despite rising concerns," *Financial Times*, 13 November 2019.

Kathy Jetnil-Kilijiner--a young Marshallese activist and political poet--was chosen to represent civil society in the 2014 meetings leading up to the landmark Paris Accords. This choice was enacted as a result of a coalition between the Pacific state delegations and their NGO networks. Kathy performed “Dear Matafele Peinam” dedicated to her infant daughter and the uncertain future she faces growing up in the Marshall Islands:

“Dear Matafele Peinam,  
 I want to tell you about that lagoon  
 that lucid, sleepy lagoon lounging against the sunrise  
 men say that one day  
 that lagoon will devour you  
 they say it will gnaw at the shoreline  
 chew at the roots of your breadfruit trees  
 gulp down rows of your seawalls  
 and crunch your island’s shattered bones.” (Kilijner, 2014)

Kilijiner did not shy away from exposing her deeply personal fears and thoughts; she unabashedly invoked her experience and desires as a mother to bring her child into a safe and bright future. Kilijiner goes on to describe how her daughter and countrymates are projected to wander stateless “with only a passport to call home” due to the inaction of global leaders.<sup>161</sup> Instead of ending on a pessimistic or sour note, Kilijiner’s beautiful poem ends with a call to action. She assures her infant daughter that the world leaders that sit before her in committee will

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<sup>161</sup> Jetnil-Kilijner, Kathy, “Dear matafele peinam,” *UNFCCC*, 2014.

take meaningful action and commit to climate reform. She attests that world leaders will make the change to save not only their lives, but also their livelihoods.

Kiljiner's performance in the UNFCCC left delegates stunned in their seats. Her beautiful prose and emotional inflection brought the debate to a near-complete standstill. Delegates, media outlets, and audience members alike praised her touching performance; even the official UNFCCC twitter page attested that there was not a dry eye in the room.<sup>162</sup> Media analysts covering Kiljiner's performance claimed that she evoked a sense of *solastalgia*, or "the increasingly pervasive feeling of sadness and loss for a world that's being irreversibly altered."<sup>163</sup> This somber, mournful feeling is considered extremely powerful and pervasive in climate discussions and has been attributed to effective political mobilization.<sup>164</sup> The real power behind these Pacific performances is their ability to inflict such forceful emotional responses, and infect diplomats on both a personal and professional level.

One of the most captivating and poignant expressions of Pacific activism in the UN is its co-optation of traditionally feminine traits and emotional displays. Though many Pacific media spectacles have focused on culturally masculine roles like "warriors" or "voyagers," their representation in the UN has been led by women or through traditionally "feminine" performances. While the image of "voyagers" has been used to represent the Pacific's historical sovereign claim to the land, the feminine portrayal of Pacific activists has come to present a universal, moral movement towards climate justice. In addition to Ian Fry's tearful testimony and Kathy Jetñil-Kiljiner's mournful testimony, many other effective diplomatic performances have been led by women. Milañ Loeak, the daughter of former Marshallese president Chris Loeak, has

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<sup>162</sup> Medina., Daniel, "This young mother's poem about her vanishing country stunned the world's leaders," *Quartz*, 24 September 2014.

<sup>163</sup>Holthause. Eric, "This climate change poem moved world leaders to tears today," *Slate*, 23 September 2014.

<sup>164</sup>Holthause., Eric, "This climate change poem moved world leaders to tears today," *Slate*, 23 September 2014.

also led impactful calls to action in international debate. In 2014, Loeak led other members of the Pacific Climate Warriors in urging states to “join [them] in the fight to keep my home above water.”<sup>165</sup>

The performance of traditionally “feminine” emotions does not come as an affront to diplomatic integrity. The procurement of emotions is an equally valid and effective mode of state representation as any stoic or masculine diplomatic performance. The emotional Pacific testimonies have come to counter the overpowering hegemony of hyper-masculine state performances. By rejecting the oppressive norms of typical debate, these Pacific activists caught the attention of international onlookers and incited delegations to act in support of their climate justice agendas. By poetically performing their indigeneity on an international stage, Pacific activists assumed the position of moral leaders and role models of the climate change discussion, and inspired (or alternatively, guilted) more powerful states to act.<sup>166</sup>

## Conclusion

The invocation of raw emotion is a deliberate, conscious, and genuine strategy of Pacific diplomats. The spectacular, eye-catching images discussed in the previous chapter can only bring about meaningful change if they are successfully translated into diplomatic spaces through emotional performances. Diplomacy is an attachment between the personal, the political, and the aesthetic. While structural and diplomatic change in the UNFCCC led to a more equal playing field for states, ultimately the integration of emotional testimony was so shocking and unprecedented that it compelled powerful nations to act.

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<sup>165</sup> McNamara, Karen E. & Farbotko., Carol “Resisting a ‘doomed’ fate: an analysis of the Pacific climate warriors,” *Australian Geographer*,. 20 February 2017.

<sup>166</sup>Calliari E., Surminski S., Mysiak J, “The politics of (and behind) the UNFCCC’s loss and damage mechanism.” *Climate Risk Mechanisms and Policy*. 29 November 2018.

The coalition building between sectors of Pacific climate activism has created, in the words of Carol Farbotko, a new perceived notion of “insurgent cosmopolitanism” in the Pacific.<sup>167</sup> Through these forged channels of connection, activists from different disciplines have coalesced together to overhaul the traditional inner workings of the UN. This primarily comes in the form of a post-Copenhagen multilateral debate forum developed by both governmental and non-governmental actors. Increased NGO involvement is neither in competition with state dominance nor necessarily signals the erosion of state diplomacy. Rather, the integration of non-state advocates in diplomacy creates a more nuanced, accessible debate stage. To many diplomatic scholars, Copenhagen represents a significant change in the future of international climate negotiations. This future is one that is inclusive of the voices of civil society and members of a modern epoch of advocacy.<sup>168</sup> While the integration of civil society signifies a new era of diplomacy, it does not indicate an erosion of the diplomatic power of state representatives. Rather, this integration has increased the connections between NGOs and government officials, which has in turn widened the possibility for emotional performances like those of Kathy Jetñil-Kilijner and Ian Fry.

Not only has emotion changed the way we interpret diplomacy, it has also forced us to reimagine environmental violence and climate change in a geo-spatial context. The visualization of the Global South as inherently more vulnerable to climate change reinforces the narrative that climate justice advocates want to advance. By forcing such images as that of the “sinking island” into international debate spaces, climate advocates call attention to the imperative need for climate action and justice. As Moïsi discusses, a global “clash of emotions” is unfolding in these

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<sup>167</sup> Suliman, Samid; Farbotko, Carol, “Indigenous (im)mobilities in the Anthropocene,” *Mobilities*. 25 April 2019.

<sup>168</sup>Spain, Anna, “Who’s going to copenhagen?: the rise of civil society in international treaty-making,” *The American Society of International Law*, 11 December 2009.

climate debates, where the institutional stoic and polluting Global North is pitted against the emotional nurture of the Global South. With performances as poignant and moving as Kathy's, this emotional cleavage is further representation of the unequal, unjust dynamics of global climate change and its traditionally apathetic response.

## **Conclusion**

In January 2020, the United Nations voted to recognize “climate refugees” and prohibit the refoulement of any individuals displaced due to climate change. The United Nations Human Rights Commission ruled that countries have the obligation to protect climate migrants under their commitment to the UN Human Rights Charter. The ruling elaborates: “Given the risk of an entire country becoming submerged under water is such an extreme risk, the conditions of life in such a country may become incompatible with the right to life with dignity before the risk is realized.”<sup>169</sup> Of all possible images of climate-induced displacement, the United Nations Human Rights Commission incorporated into its ruling the “sinking island” metaphor. Though we know these images are a dramatization of the actual conditions faced by islanders, they represent the successful translation of slow, environmental violence into unforgettable and spectacular global images. This Climate Refugee ruling is set to challenge the fundamental flaws in our international legal system, and provide a sense of justice to those directly affected by climate change. None of this would be possible if not for the effective rhetorical and diplomatic media strategies of the Pacific climate justice advocates.

In many ways, this ruling is the continuation of the commitment to “a climate change displacement facility” as was outlined in the 2015 Paris Accords. Pacific islanders are no longer constrained by the framework of “imperial migrancy” and can now claim their status as refugees

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<sup>169</sup>Su, Yvonne., “UN ruling on climate refugees could be game changer for climate action,” *Climate Home News*, 29 January 2020.

with access to rights and benefits for any individual that is forced to move. Better yet, the demand of mitigation and adaptation strategies coupled with opening opportunities for migration means that these Pacific island nations have more agency in responding to climate change. The adoption of the climate refugee ruling is indicative of a change in international migration dynamics. This ruling is testament to the tireless diplomatic campaign of Pacific advocates in getting their voices heard in the UN.

The rise of Pacific Island climate advocacy is testament to the history of environmental and social oppression and exploitation suffered by communities across the Global South. In many ways, the environmental dangers faced by the Pacific Island states emulate the imperial violence they faced historically at the hands of these same polluting nations. Climate change is very much a product of colonialism. Its disproportionate effects and harm towards developing countries is indicative of global interstate inequality and the lasting effects of imperial control. As we see in the case of the US nuclear project in the Marshall Islands, the environmental sovereignty of many of these developing nations is not something that has been fully realized in our modern world order. Our analysis on the success of these Pacific leaders must be rooted in an understanding of the adverse preconditions that they face as former colonies--historic injustices that had become engrained into the structure of the United Nations and limit the agency of former colonies in UN forums.

One of the key powers of the Pacific activists is their revamping of the historically-ignored "slow environmental violence" into something modern, relevant, digestible, and--above all--memorable. Unlike Rob Nixon's claim that our media preference for sudden, "spectacular" human rights abuses detracts from our understanding of historic colonial violence, these spectacular narratives have actually helped push Pacific environmental agendas forward in media

spaces. The power of spectacles is undeniable in their full capacity--with images of sinking islands, nuclear time bombs, and canoe-bound asylum seekers, these Pacific activists have captivated audiences worldwide. To create an image so raw and captivating that it takes on a life outside its original context is to reinvent how we envision an issue as expansive and profound as climate change. Beyond invoking a flurry of shares from viewers in their living rooms, these iconic spectacles also inflict a call to action on world leaders. The advancement of media attention regarding climate change had a definitive effect on shaping diplomatic goals in the UNFCCC. Collective international attention molds political agendas.

These Pacific Island advocates countered the unequal structural problems they faced by creating the UNFCCC to negotiate a climate change legislation. The unprecedented one-country, one-vote structure stripped away the structural inequalities that reinforced imperial power dynamics in the United Nations. By using the structure of the UNFCCC to their full advantage, Pacific island states utilized numerous working groups to help solidify their identity as post-colonial states and raise their voices and concerns in a group setting. The coalition-building between state and non-state representatives that occurred as the result of this integration also paved the way for heartfelt speakers like Kathy Jetñil-Kilijner and Ian Fry to shake up debate procedures with their tear-jerking performances.

In order to strategically advance their ideas, NGOs need to synchronize their respective interests with those of governments in a way that maintains focus on the overarching goals of mitigation and adaptation. Moreover, more than symbolizing a readiness to participate, the diplomatic integration of civil society represents an emerging expectation of NGOs to do so. No longer will civil society wait for governments to solve global problems. In this new century our global society expects to participate in problem-solving. These changes in the Paris Agreement

ultimately exemplify a form of “hybrid multilateralism” that incorporates the actions of both state and non-state actors.<sup>170</sup> Increased NGO involvement is neither in competition with state dominance nor necessarily signals the erosion of state diplomacy. Rather, the integration of non-state advocates in diplomacy creates a more nuanced, accessible debate forum.<sup>171</sup>

The Pacific Islands represent a case of exception. With exceptional story tellers, diplomats, and media strategists, these activists made their experience with environmental violence captivating and politically salient. The success of Pacific activists comes as an affront to our current human rights regime. Given our understanding of the historical foundations of the United Nations as an institutional continuation of imperial powers, we know that the structure of international relations is biased. It does not make adequate space for smaller, formerly-colonized nations to voice their concerns and make discursive change, and does not address underlying structural and political inequalities among states. The United Nations has always been a mechanism for powerful countries to determine what is important in relation to their own interests. We live in a world where global agendas are set by a few powerful nations who too often disregard the real impacts that their actions have on developing nations globally.

In many ways, we can look at the success of Pacific climate justice activists as an example of a wider analysis of resistance against imperial structural legacies. Sidney Tarrow argues that a social movement is inherently shaped by the existence of political opportunity structures. According to Tarrow, social movements arise “when shifting political conditions open opportunities for disruption and the activities of social movements in turn can alter political

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<sup>170</sup> Kuyper, Jonathan , Schroeder, Heike and Linnér, Björn-Ola, “The evolution of the unfccc,” *Annual Review*,. 20 August 2018.

<sup>171</sup> Spain, Anna, “Who’s going to copenhagen?: the rise of civil society in international treaty-making,” *The American Society of International La.*, 11 December 2009.

Samid Suliman, Carol Farbotko, Hedda Ransan-Cooper, Karen Elizabeth McNamara, Fanny Thornton, Celia McMichael & Taukiei Kitara, “Indigenous (im)mobilities in the anthropocene,” *Mobilities*. 2019.

policies and structures.”<sup>172</sup> While Tarrow ascribed his theory primarily to domestic movements, we can still understand its implications in a global context. Though officially predicated on an organized anarchy, the structure of the UN and international debate reinforce a system of hierarchy reminiscent of domestic state mechanisms. Structural changes to UN bodies can facilitate the same political opportunities as one in a domestic context. In the Pacific example, the shifting political conditions within climate diplomacy can be attributed to the Pacific Islands’ commitment to creating a more egalitarian structure within the UNFCCC. The shift in the structural composition of international diplomacy gave way for the grassroots climate justice movement to flourish and succeed in the way that it did. The success of the Pacific island media hustle was contingent on the structural integration of NGOs into UN debate. The case of Pacific climate advocacy thus supports Tarrow’s theory that social movement and momentum are related to key institutional and structural changes, and provides insight into international applications of his theory. A look into the Pacific diplomatic success can give us a better understanding of how underdogs can reject the institutional structures that hold them in place.

However, while Tarrow’s framework helps us to understand how the structural changes to the UNFCCC brought about the possibility for successful climate diplomacy, it does not fully describe the influential role that these climate activists had in pushing their agendas forward. Structural change may have created a political opportunity for Pacific activists, but ultimately the organization and strategic actions of these movements translated this opportunity into tangible change. The force that propels social movements forward is not the structural change itself, but rather the coalition of activists behind a movement. The success of social movements lies primarily within the identity of its participants--the real catalyst for change comes from their

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<sup>172</sup> Deric., Shannon, “Political sociology : oppression, resistance, and the state, ”*Pine Forge Press*, 1 January 2011.

strategic and symbolic representation of their social cause. As Doug McAdams and his collaborators write, “mediating between opportunity, organization, and action are the shared meanings and definitions that people bring to their situation.”<sup>173</sup>

The strength, resilience, creativity and cultural resurgence that we see in the case of Pacific climate activism is in many ways a testament to the power of indigenous climate action. In terms of representation in issues concerning indigenous groups, scholars like Carol Farbotko have noted the affixed hyper-marginalization of indigenous groups in international climate change negotiations. As traditionally marginalized in colonial and international spheres, indigenous groups have been ignored in international negotiations, even though they are often the most affected by climate change. To Farbotko, successful indigenous climate action serves as a uniting force for the advancement of indigenous environmental rights worldwide.<sup>174</sup> In many ways, the Pacific Islands’ path to political saliency paved the way for other similar solidarity movements to advocate for climate justice in these international forums. As we see similar indigenous movements push for environmental and climate justice, we can understand how the success of one group advances the collective vocation of them all.

In our modern era of increased visibility and media connections, many of these activists have presented themselves on the basis of their indigenous identity. In the case of Bolivia, climate justice activists have promoted a vision of Andean indigeneity to support their anti-capitalist environmental claims.<sup>175</sup> The presenting of indigenous identity has unified what Farbotko calls the “fourth world” around the “disproportionate experience of adverse climate

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<sup>173</sup> McAdam et. al. “Opportunities, mobilizing structures, and framing processes - toward a synthetic, comparative perspective on social movements.” *USW Press*, 2017.

<sup>174</sup> Suliman, Samid; Farbotko, Carol, “Indigenous (im)mobilities in the Anthropocene,” *Mobilities*. 25 April 2019.

<sup>175</sup> Suliman, Samid; Farbotko, Carol, “Indigenous (im)mobilities in the Anthropocene,” *Mobilities*. 25 April 2019.

change impacts.”<sup>176</sup> Indigeneity has represented a strong, empowering, and unifying force that bonds movements across cultural contexts. While indigeneity connotes a strong and resilient image in relation to social movements, it has also been attributed as an inherently vulnerable identity in both domestic and international spheres.

Political sociologist Emma Mitchell discusses how the imagination of vulnerability plays into social movements. “The concept of vulnerability has become a prominent way of framing disadvantage both within and beyond the academy. Expressions like ‘the most vulnerable’ appear in public discourse to refer to specific social groups who are particularly susceptible to multiple and overlapping adversities.”<sup>177</sup> Identifying and portraying oneself as a vulnerable actor in social movements can help advance the movement based on shared characteristics with other progressive campaigns. As we have seen in the case of the Pacific Islands, the notion of “vulnerability” plays a unique and contradictory role in shaping international perceptions of the movement. While the vulnerable perception of the “sinking islands” makes significant headway in international media outlets, it potentially detracts from Pacific agency and commitment to reparational climate justice. While it is difficult to determine whether this framework is entirely net-positive in the climate movement, it is impossible to deny that the appearance of vulnerability has had a significant effect on the portrayal of Pacific climate activism and their diplomatic success.

The spectacular activism from the Pacific Islands has undoubtedly given us a glimpse into the power of social movements and alternative environmental activism. Avenues of future research would include looking for the future development of the annual COP Climate debates and the inevitable changes that will accompany the progression of the Paris Accords

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<sup>176</sup> Suliman, Samid; Farbotko, Carol, “Indigenous (im)mobilities in the Anthropocene,” *Mobilities*. 25 April 2019.

<sup>177</sup> Mitchell, Emma. “Negotiating vulnerability.” *The Sociological Review*. 16 September 2019.

negotiations. Given the pressing nature of climate change adaptation, these negotiations will have to evolve at increasingly desperate speeds. Climate migrants will continue to move and emerge from an increasingly wide range of places. Soon, our conceptualization of climate refugees will no longer be confined to Pacific islanders fleeing tides in canoes or families crossing the Sahara and Mediterranean, but rather will encompass both urban and rural peoples worldwide. As the effects of climate change become a lived reality for more and more people across the globe, we will understand the significance of the Pacific's commitment to climate justice.

The goal of this thesis has been to demonstrate that international human rights has never truly existed within its utopic, philanthropic ideal. From human rights' formal inception within the 1947 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, we have always had institutional lapses in protection for the victims of structural and environmental violence. As the United Nations itself was founded as an extension of imperial power, its human rights regime was not created in a truly humanitarian manner. We must rethink our decision of putting the bulk of international human rights protections in an institution predicated on the advancement of Western power structures and empires. We need an uprooting of typical diplomatic norms in order to advance justice-oriented frameworks especially in regards to smaller, "developing," post-colonial states. While the Pacific islands have demonstrated their exceptional achievement in getting their climate agendas slowly realized, complete climate justice is only possible and effective if it progresses in a way that is remarkable and alternative to our typical understanding of international negotiation.

As we enter an era where it is no longer possible to deny the links between global inequalities and climate change, we must reimagine a more revolutionary approach to human

rights protection. Only through a dismantling of the oppressive structural dynamics of the United Nations can we even begin to bring about a meaningful and restorative climate justice. Along with stripping away the inherent institutional inequalities of the United Nations and its debate procedure, we must also deconstruct our own preconceptions of potential and legitimate diplomatic actors. We must view the “victims” of climate change not as helpless modern-day martyrs, but rather as capable agents of change who can adequately contribute to their own political and physical survival. Not drowning in the apathy of imperial institutions founded in their own marginalization, these activists are fighting for restorative climate justice and are continuously showing the world that they can in fact swim.

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