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AN ELEMENTAL ANTHROPOCENE

# Engendering the Anthropocene in Oceania: Fatalism, Resilience, Resistance

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## Abstract

The concept of the Anthropocene confounds Eurocentric distinctions of natural and human history, as Dipesh Chakrabarty observes. But who are ‘we’ in the Anthropocene, how do notions of our shared humanity contend with the cascading global inequalities of place, race, class and gender. Oceania is often said to have contributed the least and suffered the most from climate change. Pacific women, and especially those living on low lying atolls, have been portrayed as the most vulnerable to the disastrous consequences of climate change. This focuses on sea level rise and the toxic mixing, the elemental confusion of salt and fresh water caused by atmospheric changes and global warming. While not negating the gravity of present and future scenarios, how can we move beyond the pervasive fatalism of foreign framings and seemingly opposed clichéd evocations of ‘resilience’? The moniker of the *Pacific Climate Warriors 350.org* ‘We are not drowning, we are fighting’ evokes a contrary trope of resistance and resonates with Oceanic activism in politics and the creative arts.<sup>1</sup> Tracing such a genealogy of resistance might start with a greater respect for Indigenous knowledges and embodied practices in contemporary understandings of ‘climate cultures’ in Oceania which do not routinely distinguish between natural and human history.<sup>2</sup>

## Keywords:

**climate change; gender; Oceania; resilience; resistance.**

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## Engendering: Two Senses

I love the word engendering and especially its fertile double meaning. Engendering means to cause or give rise to a situation, a thing, a feeling. In Middle English it also had the more embodied, sexy meaning of begetting children or generating offspring. Then, engendering had a distinctly patrilineal and patriarchal inflection, emphasising the sperm rather than the egg, in talk of fathers engendering children. As a neologism in contemporary global English and scholarly conversations about gender, engendering can also mean to endow something with gender, or to reveal its inherent gender: feminine, masculine, trans. Despite its use in many book titles and articles—including some of my own, this sense of ‘engendering’ has not yet made it into most mainstream dictionaries alas.

In this essay I will be moving between both senses of engendering the Anthropocene—looking at the causes, catalysts and consequences of climate change in Oceania and the regional resonance of the Anthropocene. Not the word itself which, despite intense global debate about the word and the concept, has little currency in Oceania. Rather talk is overwhelmingly about climate change. I also consider how we might revision gender in this disturbing new epoch, how women and men might be differently situated and how we might think about gender and sexual fluidity in the context of the catastrophic consequences of changing climates. In Oceania, as in many parts of the world, women have been portrayed as the most vulnerable to climate change—both in the everyday encroachments of rising sea levels and in the devastations of houses and livelihoods caused by cyclones, storms and floods. It is said that women are more vulnerable to death, morbidity and gendered violence in the short term and less likely to survive or thrive in the long term, often due to feminised poverty.<sup>3</sup> Yet recent research, in the wake of Cyclone Winston in Fiji has suggested that gay and transgender people might be even *more* vulnerable, doubly victimised by such disasters and by pervasive homophobia and transphobia, which threatens their very survival.<sup>4</sup>

## The Anthropocene

But what about that word the Anthropocene? The word and the concept proposed by Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer has been much debated—as to whether it should replace the Holocene as the name of our current epoch (still rather forcefully resisted by geologists and stratigraphers) and as to when that epoch started and why.<sup>5</sup> Alternative names have been suggested: Jason Moore’s Capitalocene to foreground the place of global inequalities created by capitalism;<sup>6</sup> Donna Haraway’s unpronounceable Cthulucene to signal a more humble and less anthropocentric sense of being ‘of the earth’.<sup>7</sup> Marisol de la Cadena talks about the *anthropo-not-seen* to highlight how many people never divided human beings from ‘nature’ but how their worlds are being squeezed into the binary boxes of nature/culture.<sup>8</sup>

Many Indigenous scholars such as Kyle Whyte see the Anthropocene as the latest phase in a process of catastrophic mass extinctions of human and other life through the successive phases of imperialism and capitalist expansion.<sup>9</sup> Some suggest we should approach the Anthropocene not so much as an epoch but as a paradigm and an ethic—a new way of revisioning the place of humanity on our planet which, paradoxically given the inflated place of Anthropos in the label, is predicated on a greater humility in our relations with other living things and with the animated character of our shared world.

I do not enter these debates here but rather allude to Dipesh Chakrabarty’s first thesis in his early influential paper ‘The Climate of History’ that ‘Anthropogenic explanations of climate change spell the collapse of the age-old humanist distinction between natural and

human history'.<sup>10</sup> He sees the discipline of history as founded on a distinction between those events that are seen to derive from nature and those that are created by 'man [sic]': purposive, contingent, and changing practices. Chakrabarty suggests that it is only contemporary climate scientists who collapse this distinction of natural and human history, seeing human beings not just as the biological agents of an environmental history but also as geological agents, collectively exerting a force on the planet itself, a 'force of nature' akin to those climatic forces which in the past have caused mass extinctions.<sup>11</sup>

But, as I have argued elsewhere and elaborate below, Oceanic peoples have *not* routinely made such distinctions between natural and human histories and most are still not making them in the context of contemporary environmental transformations attributed to climate change.<sup>12</sup> For decades anthropologists have zealously interrogated the universality of the distinction between nature and culture, powerfully refuted it and along with several historians of Western science have typically traced its genealogy to Enlightenment philosophies in Europe.<sup>13</sup> The nature/culture binary is supremely Eurocentric as is its perverse gendered twin that women are closer to nature and men closer to culture, argued either on the basis of women's reproductive bodies or their assumed greater empathy with 'the environment'. I believe we need far more *research* on how women and men might be differently situated in relation to 'climate change'—how they perceive it and act on it, how they are negotiating it in everyday life and in political processes at several scales—without making unduly universalist and essentialist presumptions about the *nature* of women and men, and especially about women's inherent 'vulnerability'.<sup>14</sup>

## The 'We' of the Anthropocene

The onset of the Anthropocene has engendered a sense of collective peril on a planetary scale—and for some this 'negative unity' has animated a sense of shared humanity.<sup>15</sup> That sense is evident in the early writings of some scientists who stressed the ecological unity of the planet, even animating it as a living being like James Lovelock's Gaia.<sup>16</sup> Others like E.O. Wilson saw our collective self-recognition as a species as generating hope for a unified response to planetary crisis (we wish!).<sup>17</sup> But such talk of shared humanity, can use 'we' like a fig leaf, covering up the naked realities of global divisions and inequities between rich and poor. The wild fires of California, of Greece, and the NSW coast may engulf the mansions and beach houses of the rich as well as the humble dwellings of the poor, prolonged droughts may devastate the farmers of Australia as well as the farmers of the Papua New Guinea Highlands, intensified cyclones may ravage Northern Australia as well as Fiji and Vanuatu. But as I see it inequalities are central to both the causes and the consequences of climate change.<sup>18</sup> As Mary Robinson shows so consummately—the poor suffer most in the intensity of fires and floods not just in terms of lives and livelihoods lost and damaged and because they are uninsured but because relief efforts too often focus on high value assets.<sup>19</sup>

The use of such all-inclusive terms—'species', 'humanity'—can hide how anthropogenic forces contributing to global warming are part of the larger story of the emergence of capitalism in the West and its imperial (or quasi-imperial) domination of the rest of the world. Moreover, climate change interacts with pervasive contemporary inequalities between peoples—between rich and poor countries, between those in the Global North and those in the Global South,<sup>20</sup> between those who early industrialised and 'developed' and those who did so later, or hardly at all. These differences and inequalities have been at the centre of tense global negotiations such as those at the United Nations Climate Change Conferences—the Conferences of the Parties (COP) where accusations of differential blame

in causation and differential consequences impeded many attempts to establish targets such as those finally agreed at COP21 in Paris (but minimally effected up until COP25 in Madrid, Spain in December 2019).<sup>21</sup> Such inequalities between countries are of course compounded by inequalities within countries on the basis of class, race, region, religion, gender and sexuality.

In global terms Oceania, the term I prefer for the Pacific, is often said to have contributed the least to climate change but suffered the most.<sup>22</sup> Climate change is a pressing present reality in Oceania. We are all painfully familiar with the iconic, globally circulating images of sea-level rise and king tides engulfing the low-lying atolls of Kiribati, Tuvalu and the Marshall Islands. But dire as this is—the consequences of climate change in Oceania are even more far reaching. Sea-level rise and coastal inundation and erosion are also being experienced on the coasts of high, volcanic islands including those in Fiji, Hawai'i Papua New Guinea, Solomons, Vanuatu, Samoa, Tonga. This threatens fresh water sources and imperils major food crops like taro and yams with greater salinity. Changing patterns of rainfall and seasonality disturb the patterns of growing and harvesting garden and tree crops on which many Pacific Islanders still rely for daily food. The warming and acidification of the ocean bleaches and kills protective coral reefs and affects the fertility of fish and their movements, along with many other diverse creatures living in reefs and lagoons. Increased storm surges, floods and more intense and frequent cyclones and hurricanes devastate crops and houses, cause landslides and threaten both lives and livelihoods. It is not surprising then that representations of climate change in the Pacific and especially external foreign framings, have been fatalist, saturated with doom and gloom.

But fatalist framings of climate change in Oceania have been challenged by two other dominant frames—frames I distil in the words 'resilience' and 'resistance'. I will now consider these three dominant frames—fatalism, resilience and resistance—in both foreign and indigenous texts and images and in embodied practices of climate change in Oceania—and ponder how each of these might be *gendered*. I stress at the outset that these frames are not mutually exclusive, they overlap and although they have been changing over time the sequence presented here should not be read as a teleology.

## Fatalist Framings: Foreign and Indigenous

First, I focus on the fatalist frame in both foreign and indigenous portrayals, typically focused, even fixated, on the image of the rising sea. Professor Patrick Nunn, a geographer who spent twenty-five years living in Fiji and working at the University of the Pacific in Suva, published a paper with the graphic title 'The End of the Pacific?'.<sup>23</sup> Here he observed that '[o]ver the past 200 years, sea level has been rising along most Pacific Island coasts causing loss of productive land through direct inundation (flooding), shoreline erosion and groundwater salinization'.<sup>24</sup>

He agreed with those scientists who estimate that by 2100 sea levels across Oceania may be 1.2 metres higher than today.<sup>25</sup> He sees this as posing huge challenges not just for subsistence livelihoods, and especially those oriented to the sea, but to the urban infrastructure of towns and political capitals, primarily concentrated on Pacific coasts (Port Moresby, Port Vila, Suva, Honiara, Nuku'alofa, Apia, etc.). He graphically images likely scenarios both for the Rewa Delta and Nadi town in Fiji and observes that past efforts at adaptation have been largely unsuccessful—sea walls typically erode in 12–18 months and elevating houses and water tanks just delays the inevitable need for relocation.



*Within the next 20–30 years, it is likely that many coastal settlements will need to be relocated, partly or wholly ... In many ways, the historical and modern Pacific will end within the next few decades. There will be fundamental irreversible changes in island geography, settlement patterns, subsistence systems, societies and economic development, forced by sea level rise and other factors.*<sup>26</sup>

Patrick Nunn does not address gender as part of these ‘fundamental irreversible changes’ but feminist geographers, anthropologists and environmental humanities scholars have not only challenged this fatalist framing but suggested that it is gendered. As Carol Farbotko, Heather Lazrus, Karen McNamara and Elizabeth DeLoughrey have long argued the dominant image of islands drowning in a rising sea and their inhabitants being forcibly displaced as ‘climate change refugees’, though anchored in pressing realities, not only portrays Pacific peoples as perforce vulnerable victims but tends to *naturalise* their fate, occluding the distant causes of climate change in fossil-fuelled economies beyond Oceania and portraying them as an exemplary portent of global crisis and catastrophe. Farbotko and Lazrus suggest that Pacific Islanders have thereby become ‘ventriloquists’ for a Western crisis of nature,<sup>27</sup> while DeLoughrey laments how many photographs and documentary films envision Pacific cultures as ‘dying’, simultaneously a fragile, insular paradise doomed to extinction and a portent of an apocalyptic planetary future.<sup>28</sup> Such claims are readily evidenced in canonical visual images from Kiribati, Tuvalu and the Marshall Islands, like those from Kiribati by Rodney Dekker for Oxfam in 2010 and Justin McManus for the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 October 2013.<sup>29</sup>



Figure 1 Kiribati. Justin McManus for *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 October 2013

But we might also witness how these early images are gendered, portraying women and sometimes children as *the* pre-eminent vulnerable victims. Women are here represented as the heart of community survival, walking down a narrow atoll path towards a large communal house as the sea engulfs on both sides, continuing to cultivate gardens, fish, and nurture children as the sea is lapping at their legs, or as sandbags provide an evanescent wall against the ocean.

Such vulnerable female figures predominate in many early policy documents by governments, NGOs and international agencies too. Consider this early statement by the Australian government:

*On average women are more inclined towards pro-environmental behaviour, such as taking part in citizen and community actions. Thus the inclusion of women in locally focused assessments and adaptation is essential not only because women are especially vulnerable, but also because they can be valuable contributors to adaptation work. [my emphasis]<sup>30</sup>*

A United Nations Development Program (UNDP) policy brief in 2013 echoed these views: 'because women often show more concern for the environment ... their greater involvement in politics and in nongovernmental organisations could result in environmental gains'.<sup>31</sup>

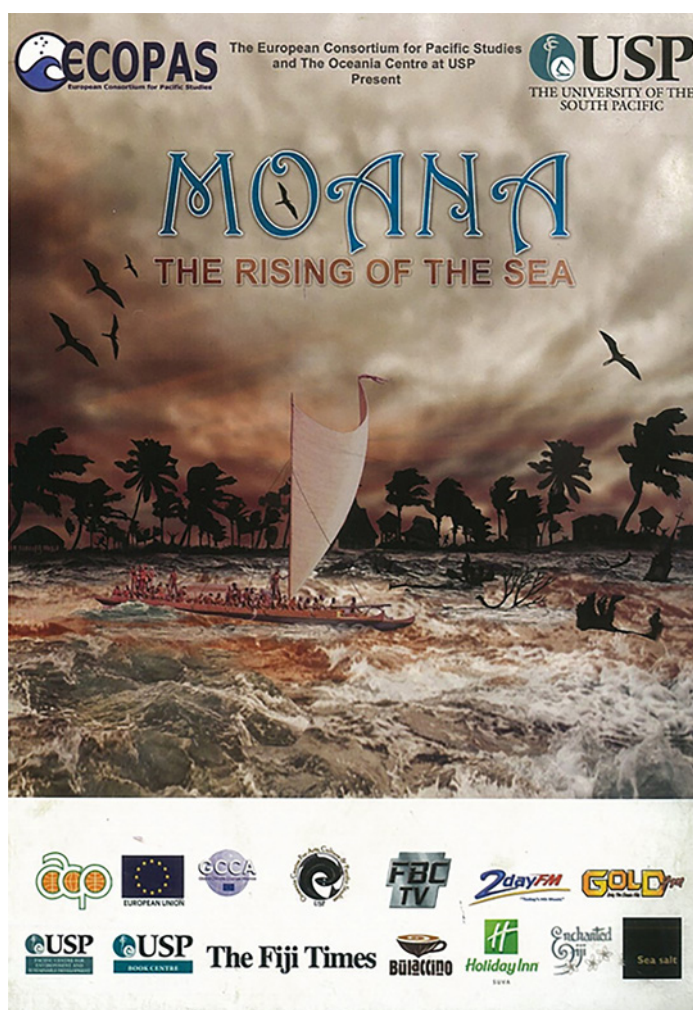


Figure 2 Cover image of Moana: The Rising of the Sea

As Miranda Scarr has shown in her stellar ANU honours thesis the narratives in such reports follow a dubious Eurocentric logic based on 'three fundamental claims' about women in Oceania:

- 1) their special relationship to the environment,
- 2) their unique ecological knowledge and

- 3) their increased climate vulnerability through feminised poverty ... Insofar as women's knowledge and agency is acknowledged it is circumscribed by their adaptation to a problem that has already been diagnosed by external environmental experts and cogent solutions offered.<sup>32</sup>

Her analysis does not negate vulnerability but raises questions about whether all women in Oceania are inherently more vulnerable. This might be true of poor women, single mothers, those not living in their ancestral homes, in precarious urban settlements, women with a disability, those displaced after a disaster, or those who are lesbian and transwomen. As earlier noted, after Cyclone Winston in Fiji in 2016, the people who suffered most were from 'sexual and gender minorities', not just from the damage of the cyclone but the increased stigma in its wake.<sup>33</sup> Monolithic presumptions that all women are inherently vulnerable can evacuate the agency of Oceanic women and portray them yet again as in need of saving by their white sisters.

Fatalist frames are not just created by foreigners however. Witness this image from a performance which premiered in Suva and toured Europe as part of the European Consortium for Pacific Studies (ECOPAS) project funded by the European Union (EU): *Moana, The Rising of the Sea* (Figure 3).<sup>34</sup> The plot line was a stark choice: should we stay or should we go. Moreover, male political leaders like the late Tony de Brum of the Marshall Islands and Anote Tong, erstwhile President of Kiribati, have potently used the image of rising seas to raise global awareness about the plight of Pacific countries, especially in the context of climate change negotiations like COP. But, Tony De Brum, like the current President of the Marshall Islands Hilda Heine (the first woman head of state in the Pacific) and her daughter, the celebrated spoken-word artist Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner make the strong link between the environmental devastation and irradiation of the Marshall Islands caused by the nuclear imperialism of the United States and the contemporary devastations of climate change.<sup>35</sup> De Brum attributed both alike to the imperial hubris and the unfettered growth of the fossil-fuelled economy of the United States. And, despite the fact that the carbon footprint of Marshall Islanders is miniscule in global terms, Tony De Brum promoted their increasing use of the power of the sun, wind and ocean, including ocean thermal energy conversion (OTEC).



Figure 3 Tony deBrum<sup>36</sup>



Anote Tong has also deployed the powerful imagery of seas drowning the 33 atolls and islands of Kiribati (just 1.8 metres above sea level), suggesting that they will be uninhabitable in future decades. While President of Kiribati (2003–2016), in 2014 he bought 6000 acres of forested land on Vanua Levu in Fiji as a potential future refuge for the country's 115,000 citizens. In 2016 he proclaimed, 'relocation, no matter how undesirable, must therefore be the brutal reality of the future of atoll island nations and part of the solution.'<sup>37</sup> He called his policy Migration with Dignity. He also mooted the possibility of using advanced technologies to build up the atolls or to create large elevated floating islands (as the Chinese have done in the South China Sea), and engaged with engineering firms from Japan, South Korea and the United Arab Emirates in such plans.<sup>38</sup>

Tong collaborated on the documentary film *Anote's Ark* (directed by Matthieu Rytz), where he suggests that, regardless of what was agreed in Paris, his country will inevitably soon be underwater.<sup>39</sup> Though celebrated at the Sundance Film Festival and other screenings globally, *Anote's Ark* caused a political storm in Kiribati (Figure 5).<sup>40</sup> The current government headed by President T.E. Taneti Maamau alleged that the filmmakers had not been ethical or respectful of local people, suggesting that the claim that Kiribati will be underwater in 30–50 years 'is very offensive and shows lack of respect for the people on the ground who are doing all they can to cope, and to the government of Kiribati that is trying to build a brighter future and hope for its people'.<sup>41</sup> He pitted the dominant voice of environmental science amplified by Anote Tong, against the muting of local voices and stories. The director Matthieu Rytz counterclaimed that he was subject to a more general crackdown on foreign journalists, researchers and filmmakers initiated by the current administration (after the major *MV Butiraoi* ferry disaster). He was arrested in January 2018 and his property confiscated when he tried to show the film in Kiribati. This political contestation in Kiribati about representations of their predicaments in confronting climate change pits despair against hope, victimhood against agency and the frame of a doomed fate against the frame of resilience.

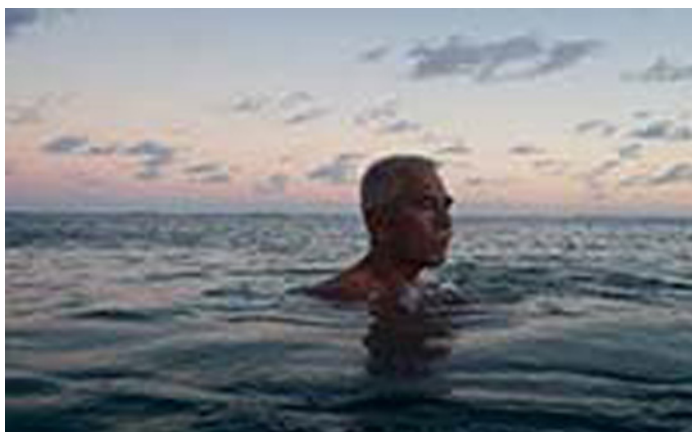


Figure 4 Anote Tong swimming in the sea. Used with permission. © Eye Steel<sup>42</sup>

## Resilience

'Resilience' has become an equally compelling frame in contemporary conversations about climate change, within and beyond Oceania, in popular, scholarly, policy and activist circles. It is far broader than the notion of 'adaptation' to an externally defined threat, since it posits



that the resilience or strength of Pacific people can also be found in their own embodied experience and knowledge. Since they have survived dramatic environmental challenges and changes in the past, including volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, cyclones and even dramatic changes in sea levels (for example, the so-called 'A.D. 1300' event when sea levels dramatically fell) it is envisaged that they have the resilient capacity to deal with the contemporary challenges of climate change.<sup>43</sup> But equally resilience is sought by conjoining local with global knowledge and practice, by using the introduced insights of environmental scientists and development practitioners in what some ni-Vanuatu call *tupela save*—two ways of knowing.

The concept of resilience now has a wide currency in Oceania and especially in the policy language of governments and NGOs seeking to manage risks and secure sustainable development.<sup>44</sup> The Australian Government's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) ran a Pacific Risk Resilience Program (PRRP) from 2012–2018 (in Fiji, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Vanuatu) and a recent policy brief again highlights resilience in relation to climate change.<sup>45</sup> In 2012 the Pacific Island Forum Leaders supported the development of an integrated regional framework on climate change and disaster risk reduction termed a 'Framework for Resilient Development in the Pacific' and promoted specific country plans.<sup>46</sup> In Vanuatu, for example six national and international NGOs established a consortium, the Vanuatu Climate Adaptation Network (VCAN) with the credo *Yumi stap redi long klaemet jenis* (We are ready for climate change) and designed a Vanuatu Community Resilience Framework. Within this framework resilience was defined by government partners and NGOs as: 'to stand up strong' 'to withstand impacts', 'to bounce back' or as 'adaptive capacity'.<sup>47</sup> To quote a statement by Oxfam:

*The concept of resilience has become a central element of the Vanuatu NGO Climate Change Adaptation Program, providing a unifying framework for the work in climate adaptation and disaster risk reduction at a community level. The concept is based on the capacity of communities to deal with shocks and stresses and adapt to uncertain futures. The focus on resilience at a community level is based on well-established people-centred development approaches, which focus on enhancing or extending communities' capacity to adapt and change.*<sup>48</sup>

As we can see from this quote notions of 'resilience' tend to be grounded in local 'communities', in the rural grassroots rather than the urban spaces of male-dominated state politics and burgeoning commodity economies. Especially in the western Pacific, because of their fewer numbers or their discursive exclusion from urban centres, women are often seen to be particularly crucial for everyday projects of resilience in rural village settings (and can assume undue burdens thereby). Here, women increasingly bear the greater burden of labour in subsistence livelihoods and domestic reproduction while men are more heavily engaged in cash cropping, migrant labour in extractive industries like mining and logging and masculinist, modernist projects like *bisnis* and *politik*.<sup>49</sup>

So, it is perhaps unsurprising that in some later and more sophisticated policy documents on gender and climate change in Oceania women are seen as critical to 'resilience'. For example the 2014 UN Women Climate Change Pacific Brief entitled, *Gender, Climate Change, and Disaster Risk Management*, observes:

*Women's distinct roles also provide skills and knowledge, which if utilized effectively, can be a key resource for positive adaptation and response. Women are not victims, and their contributions will be fundamental to effectively adapting to the effects of climate change and building resilience to disasters.*<sup>50</sup>

Here we can see the trope of woman as victim rejected in favour of woman as agent. This shuttling between the language of victim and agent has been expressly criticised by many, including Bernadette Resurrección who witnesses the political traction of using these twinned rhetorical figures: women are both ‘climate vulnerable’ and ‘agency endowed’.<sup>51</sup> But we might want to ask further what type of agency is imaged through such notions of ‘resilience’?

This trope of resilience has been recently analysed by Laurent Dousset and Mélissa Nayral and by Siobhan McDonnell in papers which, though conceived separately, talk to each other and to me. I will channel them both here. The notion of resilience originated in the physical sciences, to describe the capacity of a body to regain its original shape after an external physical impact or internal exertion of force. It travelled from the structure of matter into psychology, geography and environmental sciences where it was used to describe the capacity—by an individual or an ecosystem—to absorb shocks or changes, in such a way that it was still functional, albeit renewed and reorganised.<sup>52</sup> Ecologists like Crawford Holling suggested ecosystems had non-linear dynamics with multiple states of stability.<sup>53</sup> But, as it has been used in the social sciences and in the context of climate change in particular, the concept of resilience rather privileges stability and continuity, celebrating coping mechanisms which restore wellbeing after a critical threat (such as a cyclone or a king tide). Dousset and Nayral note the ‘warnings against an uncritical use of the concept to understand social phenomena’ ... because it ‘renaturalizes society in terms of a mechanical ecosystemic approach imposing a vision of stability as being the historical purpose of social processes.’<sup>54</sup> It celebrates a rather conservative notion of coping with threats or counterbalancing against shocks. Moreover, it tends to equate an actor’s individual resilience with their acting in the interests of collective wellbeing, thus occluding both inequities and contests within an imagined holistic ‘community’.

Do those who privilege women’s pre-eminent capacity for resilience see them as more reliably suppressing individual wellbeing for an imagined collective wellbeing, and more inclined to assume responsibility than men for collective survival? This is a very large presumption. Moreover as an eminent climate scientist has suggested to me, the notion of resilience has too often been weaponised in global debates to distract from or diminish the responsibilities of the big polluters.

## Resistance

Finally, I consider the engendering of the third frame—resistance. Like Lila Abu-Lughod, I will try to be wary of romancing resistance, individual or collective.<sup>55</sup> Resistance is, as she insists channeling Michel Foucault, always a diagnostic of power, indeed its constant couple.<sup>56</sup> Katerina Teaiwa considers the long history of resistance in Oceania and its regional expression from the colonial period to the present while Talei Luscia (now Luscia Mangioni) in another stellar ANU honours thesis has traced a ‘genealogy of resistance’ in the continuities between the environmental activism of the Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific movement and contemporary climate change, especially as manifest in creative Oceanic expressions. In the context of climate change in Oceania, resistance is best exemplified and catalysed through the credo of the 350 Pacific, the Pacific Climate Warriors ‘We are not drowning, we are fighting’.<sup>57</sup>

The campaign coordinator of 350.org in Fiji, Fenton Lutunatabua early talked about the motivations for the Pacific Climate Warriors campaign, and stressed how sea-level rise was not just an environmental threat but a threat to Islander identity. He chose to deploy images that foregrounded indigenous power in resistance to those who are to blame. ‘We need to make

the big polluters in the region, and particularly Australia, aware of [our] experiences and how they as neighbouring powers are the source of our problems.’<sup>58</sup> These words and the associated images clearly express not a sense of shared human catastrophe but a staunch sense of the inequities and injustice in the global and regional character of climate change. There is no fig leaf of the ‘we’ of shared humanity hiding the anger in this response.

And this strong sense of agency and of Oceanic anger, especially on the part of the younger generation, came home to us in Australia with the visit of thirty Pacific Climate Change Warriors to our shores in October 2014.<sup>59</sup> They navigated a spectacular flotilla of canoes that briefly halted the operations of loading coal in the main port of Newcastle. Only four coal ships were able to leave that day. These vessels carried both men and women warriors, sometimes in canoes whose hulls were made by men and sails crafted by women.

The canoe is a crucial technology for and symbol of Oceanic connections—reanimating the shared memories of ancient seafaring by ancestors who settled the Pacific and highlighting their persistent relationships, despite the partitions created by colonialism—the ‘lines across the ocean’ which segregated Melanesia, Polynesia and Micronesia on the basis of Eurocentric visions and racial hierarchies, the restrictions on travel and mobility emergent from the novel boundaries of colonially created nation states, the severing of ancestral Oceanic genealogies as some islanders became Indigenous and others migrants in settler colonial states like New Zealand.

The stellar visual imagery for this campaign clearly deploys both male and female figures as staunch warriors, often situated amongst the ruins of rusting boats or abandoned buildings (Figures 6, 7, 8). There is a delightful irony, analysed by McNamara and Farbotko in that such images are an integral part of campaigns which are for the most part non-violent if compelling performances.<sup>60</sup> They suggest this subverts the ‘hypermasculine hegemony’ of the warrior figure, animating the ‘more traditional feminine characteristics of nurturing and collaborating’ without undue adversarialism. They see these ‘traditional feminine characteristics’ revealed in the climate change activism of Christian churches, creative artistic expressions, museum installations and on the internet. Yet surely much climate change activism is both adversarial and feminine.



Figure 5 ‘We Are Not Drowning, We Are Fighting’. © Te Mana<sup>61</sup>



Figure 6 As Pacific Islanders we are ready to take our message to the fossil fuel industry. © Naveet Marayan<sup>62</sup>



Figure 7 We must draw on our heritage and ancestral strength to defend our homes. © Naveet Marayan<sup>63</sup>

Palpably the spoken word artistry and more recent visual video performance works by Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner, celebrated Pacific Climate Change Warrior from the Marshall Islands, combines these allegedly ‘traditional feminine characteristics’ with a robust adversarial posture against



the fossil fuel industry. Witness the poignant performance of her poem *Matafele Peinam* dedicated to her then infant daughter and first delivered at the United Nations in September 2014.<sup>64</sup> As I see and hear it the emotional tug of the maternal promise to her daughter ‘No one’s drowning baby’ is wedded to and amplified by the angry expression of sovereign Oceanic sentiments:

*No greedy whale of a company sharking through political seas | No backwater bullying of businesses with broken morals | No blindfolded bureaucracies gonna push this Mother Ocean over the edge.*<sup>65</sup>

As Miranda Scarr consummately argued,<sup>66</sup> Kathy here deploys not just resistant but counter-hegemonic Oceanic frames in which the body of the person and the body of the land are one and where the mother *is* the Ocean. Such resistant feminine frames are also deployed by powerful Pasifika visual artists working in the diaspora such as Latai Taumoepeau, celebrated by both Katerina Teaiwa and Talei Luscia and highlighted in the exhibition *Oceania Rising* at the Australian Museum in Sydney in October 2018.<sup>67</sup>

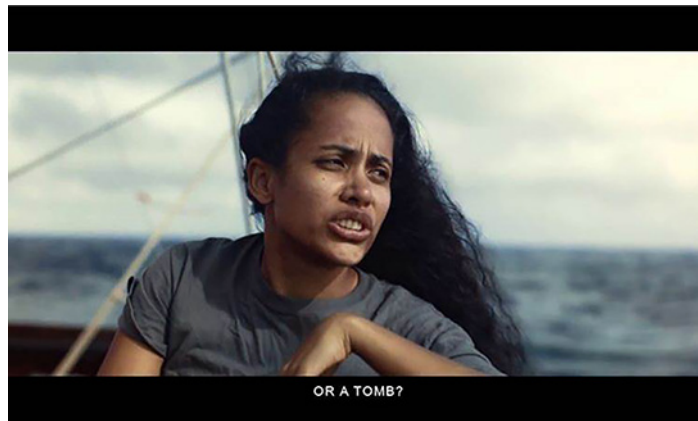


Figure 8 Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner, *Anointed*. Source. *Anointed*. Online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HuDA7izeYrk> (accessed 11 November 2019). Used with permission

## Oceanic frames, everyday resistance and Christianity

Finally, I ponder how we might trace genealogies of resistance not just in these more overtly politicised expressions but also in how Oceanic frames—indigenous epistemologies and dare I say ontologies—defy Western framings of climate change as pre-eminently a problem in nature, albeit with palpable cultural and geopolitical consequences. Perhaps with the exception of those well versed in introduced environmental sciences, as I earlier noted Oceanic people *do not* habitually separate natural from cultural transformations in their interpretations of ‘climate change’.

Ideas that human beings can influence the weather, causing sunshine or rain, calming or enraging the ocean, even causing volcanic eruptions, earthquakes and tsunamis are entirely familiar concepts across Oceania. Climate and weather are often seen as social barometers in the Pacific, signs of wrongs or sins; talk about climate change has emerged as anticolonial ideologies and Christian prophecies.<sup>68</sup> Notions of causality operating therein can be quite

distinct from global scientific discourses about global warming. When introduced technocratic and bureaucratic ways of knowledge and practice rub up against such local modalities of knowing, the result is often 'friction'.<sup>69</sup> But Pacific peoples also evince an 'adept skill in appropriating external interests or discourses ... and then turning them into home-grown initiatives'.<sup>70</sup> Christianity is a potent and pervasive example—a world religion introduced into the region as an intimate part of European colonisation but now affirmed almost everywhere as Indigenous and integral to *kastom*, *vakavanua*, *fa'a Samoa*, the Pacific way. Christian notions have been critical to responses to climate change but in diverse ways.

In his ethnography of the Marshall Islands Peter Rudiak-Gould argued that '[d]espite awareness of their tiny carbon footprint, grassroots Marshall Islanders (if not their government) have strongly favoured a response of guilt and atonement rather than outrage and protest'.<sup>71</sup> This is very different from the stance of Marshallese leaders such as the late Tony de Brum and the current President Hilda Heine who, as we have seen, squarely blame the big polluters, fossil fuel companies, industrialised countries and especially the United States.<sup>72</sup> After decades of government and NGO education, ordinary Marshallese are well aware of the science of climate change, but rather than blame the big polluters, Rudiak-Gould argues they rather implicate themselves in a logic of universal blame, alongside other human beings, a 'we' of shared humanity if you like, or perhaps the 'we' of committed Christians.

Such Marshallese self-blame is disturbing, but Rudiak-Gould suggests we might understand this not as ignorance, denial nor false consciousness but as the local appropriation of global warming discourse in terms of pre-existing, pervasive narratives, narratives which do not distinguish between the natural and the cultural.<sup>73</sup> These are narratives about cultural decline, that indigenous 'traditions' have been lost because of Christianity and the seductions of introduced things and of a modernity interpreted as emulating the practices of the imperial power, America.<sup>74</sup> Ordinary Marshallese suggest they too should contribute to global solutions by cleaning up their shorelines, refusing styrofoam cups, walking rather than driving. So, climate change discourse here morphs into an ethic of reanimating Indigenous practices—choosing local food sources, revaluing Indigenous arts (pandanus textiles), revitalising Indigenous values (respect for the land and the ancestors who dwell within) and using sources of energy which come from the sun, the wind and the waves. Rudiak-Gould thus suggests that although such Marshallese self-blame for climate change is problematic that it is also potentially 'empowering, postcolonial, counterhegemonic'.<sup>75</sup>

There are also interesting indigenous twists emergent from that low-lying atoll nation we have already visited—Kiribati. We have witnessed the contest between Anote Tong's fatalistic acceptance of Migration with Dignity and the current President insisting on hope and development in situ. Anote Tong also diverges from his elder brother Dr Harry Tong who earlier suggested that Anote had turned his back on God. Using the Bible as a potent political weapon, Dr Harry rather suggested that 'God had spoken to Noah that the world will not be flooded again and he created the rainbow as a sign'.<sup>76</sup> The atolls of Kiribati are often blessed by rainbows. Some vocal Christians thus interpret the biblical story of Noah's Ark to reassure themselves and others that Kiribati, their beloved, sacred country will never be deserted by God, will never go underwater. This suggests a standoff, a contradiction between secular science and the Christian religion. But, as Wolfgang Kemp reveals, this is a *minority* view and many Christian leaders are in fact accepting the diagnoses of environmental science and rather reinterpret the story of Noah's Ark as a warning to be prepared.<sup>77</sup>

Christian interpretations of and responses to climate change in Oceania have not always been so benign. A paper on Tropical Cyclone Winston by four Fijian co-authors and John

Cox reveals that some Christians, and especially evangelical iTaukei Christians interpreted Winston as an act of divine judgement and punishment. It was seen as a sign that Fijian inhabitants of their *vanua*, a sacred land akin to ancient Israel, had broken their covenant with God. Some suggested that the areas most severely hit were where sinful people were concentrated. This not only singled out certain devastated regions but also certain people—including homosexuals and transgender people—blamed for living ‘sinful lives’.<sup>78</sup> The way in which Cyclone Winston rendered such marginalised people in Fiji doubly vulnerable is powerfully documented in the report *Down by the River*.<sup>79</sup> Evangelical Christians critiqued the government’s nationalist message of #Stronger than Winston as lacking Christian humility. But again such Christian interpretations of Winston as a manifestation of divine wrath were opposed by Cliff Bird and other Oceanic theologians who consider that Christians should cherish and safeguard all of God’s creation.

## Conclusion

*International disaster discourse eschews blame, frames catastrophic events as natural phenomena, and allows government and nongovernment organizations’ relief efforts to be incorporated into moral political narratives that construct Australia as a generous donor.*<sup>80</sup>

Of course disasters such as Cyclone Pam in Vanuatu in March 2015, Cyclone Winston in Fiji in February 2016 and the prolonged drought in Papua New Guinea in 2016 are occasions when Australia steps in with alacrity as a generous donor. But in framing these catastrophic events as ‘natural phenomena’ we can occlude the way in which these phenomena are, like the current severe drought in Australia, increasingly the result of anthropogenic climate change. So Australian donations can be seen to be a miniscule redress for the massive damage that our emissions are causing to the world and especially our near neighbours in Oceania. When Tony Abbot was still Prime Minister, Australia effectively held Pacific leaders hostage at the Pacific Island Forum held in Port Moresby a few months before COP 21 in Paris. There is a yawning difference between the weasel words emergent from that meeting and those strident words of the Suva Declaration made by the Pacific Island Development Forum around the same time.<sup>81</sup> This was also the moment when Peter Dutton, then Minister for Immigration, uttered those infamous words about Pacific time: ‘Time doesn’t mean anything when you are about to have water lapping at your door’.<sup>82</sup>

The Pacific Islands Forum Leaders Meeting in Nauru in September 2018 and in Tuvalu in 2019 revealed yet again the large gap between the sense of severity and urgency of Pacific leaders confronting climate change and the indifference of the current Australian political leadership. Before Tuvalu Scott Morrison promised to cut Australia’s plastic pollution and rebadged \$500 million of Australian aid to climate change relief and resilience in the region. But he resolutely refused to change Australian government policy on climate change and renewable energy. The chasm between Australia and Pacific leadership deepened immeasurably in Tuvalu as Morrison engaged in fierce debate with Australia trying to dilute agreed outcomes.<sup>83</sup> They only partially succeeded. Most of the Australia media failed to acknowledge that, in the assessment of Dame Meg Taylor, Secretary-General of the Pacific Island Forum, the words of the final Communique and Kainaki II Declaration were the strongest and most united ever to emerge from a PIF Leaders’ Meeting.<sup>84</sup>

Still in Australia in late 2019, the ‘climate wars’ endure, not just between political parties but within the Liberal–National Party coalition. These internecine wars have been holding the people of Australia, the people of Oceania and indeed the whole planet hostage. We

are told it is more important to keep the lights on than to stave off the prospect of another mass extinction. As the coal lobby and the right-wing conservatives who are their servants and ideological fellow travellers triumph, we will continue to see the lie, perpetuated in the Murdoch press and out of the large mouths of Alan Jones and Ray Hadley, that cheap energy cannot be green energy. I am writing loudly and frankly because I want to keep hope, not just for my dear friends and colleagues across Oceania, but for my daughter Anna and her husband Joshua, my eight-year-old granddaughter Chloe and my infant granddaughter Madeleine Rose. I seek to keep hope for all of us, whomever that 'we' may be.<sup>85</sup>

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## Filmography

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Rytz, Matthieu, *Anotes Ark*, documentary film, 77 mins, Canada, 2018, <http://www.anotesark.com>

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## Notes

1. 350 Pacific Team, 'We are not drowning. We are fighting', *350 Pacific*, 20 February 2013.
2. See the stellar ANU honours thesis by Talei Luscia (now Talei Luscia Mangioni) 'The Calyx of Oceania: Creativity and Environmental Movements' where she develops the concept of the 'genealogy of resistance' linking the environmental activism of the Nuclear Free and Independent Movement and contemporary climate change activism with a focus on creative expression. See also Katerina Teaiwa's 'Our Rising Sea of Islands: Pan-Pacific Regionalism in the Age of Climate Change', *Pacific Studies*, vol. 41, no.1-2, 2018, 26–54. Here she looks at the 'thousands of years of cultural resilience in Oceania, and the seeds of Pan-Pacific regionalism, creative expression, and resistance that have been planted during and after colonial rule'.
3. Helen James, 'How do we re-make our lives? Gender and sustainability in the post-disaster context in Asia', in Helen James and Douglas Paton (eds), *The Consequences of Disasters: Demographic Planning, and Policy Implications*, Springfield: Charles C. Thomas Publishers, 2016, pp. 201–23. UN Women, *Time to Act: On Gender, Climate Change and Disaster Risk Reduction*, lead author Kate Morioka, Bangkok, UN Women, 2016.
4. John Cox, Glen Finau, Romitesh Kent, Jope Tarai and Jason Titifanue, 'Disaster, divine judgement, and original sin. Christian interpretations of Tropical Cyclone Winston and climate change in Fiji', in Kalissa Alexeyeff and Siobhan McDonnell (eds), *Re-Possessing Paradise*, special issue of *The Contemporary Pacific*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2018, 380–411. Emily Dwyer and Lana Woolf, Edge Effect, *Down By the River: Addressing*

*the Rights, Needs and Strengths of Fijian Sexual and Gender Minorities in Disaster Risk Reduction and Humanitarian Response*, Carlton, Melbourne: Oxfam Australia, Edge Effect and Rainbow Foundation Fiji, 2018.

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6. Jason W. Moore, 'The capitalocene part one: On the nature and origins of our ecological crisis', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, vol. 44, no. 3, 2017, pp. 594–630.
7. Donna Haraway, 'Anthropocene, capitalocene, plantationocene, chthulucene: Making kin', *Environmental Humanities*, vol. 6, 2015, pp. 159–65. Donna Haraway, 'Staying with the trouble: Anthropocene, capitalocene, chthulucene', in Jason W. Moore (ed.), *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, Oakland, CA, PM Press, 2016, pp. 34–76.
8. See Marisol de la Cadena, 'Uncommoning Nature', *e-flux journal* 2015. <http://supercommunity.e-flux.com/texts/uncommoning-nature/>. See also the two essays in this volume dealing with the elements of fire and water which challenge such binary boxes: Timothy Neale, Alex Zahara, and Will Smith, 'An eternal flame: the elemental governance of wildfire's pasts, presents and futures', *Cultural Studies Review*, 2019; Jessica R. Cattellino, Georgina Drew, and Ruth A. Morgan, 'Water Flourishing in the Anthropocene,' *Cultural Studies Review*, 2019.
9. Kyle Whyte, 'Indigenous climate change studies: Indigenizing futures, decolonizing the anthropocene', *English Language Notes*, vol. 55, nos 1–2, 2017, pp. 153–62.
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14. This essay might be read as a conceptual prelude to the empirical work of the ARC Discovery Project *Engendering Climate Change, Reframing Futures in Oceania* (DP180104224) engaging myself, Siobhan McDonnell, Murray Garde, Kathy Jetnīl-Kijiner and several other scholars in research in Fiji, Vanuatu and the Marshall Islands.
15. Chakrabarty, 'The climate of history'.
16. James Lovelock, *The Vanishing Face of Gaia: A Final Warning*, London: Penguin Books, 2009.
17. E.O. Wilson, *The Creation: An Appeal to Save Life on Earth*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006.
18. See Chakrabarty, 'The climate of history'. Chakrabarty, 'Climate and capital'. Margaret Jolly, 'Horizons and rifts in conversations about climate change in Oceania', in Warwick Anderson, Tony Ballantyne, Barbara Brookes and Miranda Johnson (eds), *Pacific Futures*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2018, pp. 17–48.
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78. See Kempf, p. 80. See also Hannah Fair, 'Three stories of Noah: Navigating religious climate change narratives in the Pacific Island region', *Geo: Geography and Environment*, vol. 5, no. 2, July–December 2018, pp. 1–15. In 'Three stories of Noah', Hanna Fair discerns three variants of the Noah's Ark story in Vanuatu, Tuvalu and broader Oceanic discussions of climate change: the 'rainbow covenant as a basis for denial, Noah as an icon of preparation, and Islanders as unjustly outside of the ark' (1). Following Mike Hulme she suggests the need to 'spiritualise' climate change, to see that religion in general and Christianity in particular is not always a barrier to dealing with climate change, and that secular scientific and spiritual approaches can be brought together as *tufala save* (two knowledges, in Vanuatu's Bislama).
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85. Taylor, Dame Meg The Kainaki II Declaration is a Signal of Our Strength Pacific Island Forum Communique 2019 <https://www.forumsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/50th-Pacific-Islands-Forum-Communique.pdf>. See also the excellent recent appraisals Katerina Teaiwa and Tarcisius Kabutaulaka on how Australia's intransigent position on climate change is imperilling any sense of neighbourliness or 'kinship' with the peoples of Oceania and is at odds with the 'step up' designed to counter increasing Chinese influence in the region. Katerina Teaiwa (2019). No Distant Future: Climate Change as an Existential Threat. *Australian Foreign Affairs*, 6, 51–70. Tarcisius Kabutaulaka, and Katerina Teaiwa (2019). Climate, Coal, Kinship and Security in Australia-Pacific Relations. Australian Institute of International Affairs, 21 Aug 2019.
86. Our capacity to keep hope is buoyed by powerful creative expression. Dear Reader go see and hear the poem *Rise* co-created by Kathy Jetnīl Kijiner from the Marshall islands and Aka Niviana from Greenland for 350.org [available through Vimeo]. In a performance framed by glaciers melting and sea levels rising, they exchange words and histories, stones and shells, a sisterly duo, urging us to rise in resistant hope and political action.