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The first climate refugees? Contesting global narratives of climate change in Tuvalu

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Abstract

Climate change effects such as sea-level rise are almost certain. What these outcomes mean for different populations, however, is far less certain. Climate change is both a narrative and material phenomenon. In so being, understanding climate change requires broad conceptualisations that incorporate multiple voices and recognise the agency of vulnerable populations. In climate change discourse, climate mobility is often characterised as the production of 'refugees', with a tendency to discount long histories of ordinary mobility among affected populations. The case of Tuvalu in the Pacific juxtaposes migration as everyday practice with climate refugee narratives. This climate-exposed population is being problematically positioned to speak for an entire planet under threat. Tuvaluans are being used as the immediate evidence of displacement that the climate change crisis narrative seems to require. Those identified as imminent climate refugees are being held up like ventriloquists to present a particular (western) 'crisis of nature'. Yet Tuvaluan conceptions of climate challenges and mobility practices show that more inclusive sets of concepts and tools are needed to equitably and effectively approach and characterise population mobility.

Keywords

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The first climate refugees? Contesting global narratives of climate change in Tuvalu

Carol Farbotko and Heather Lazrus

Climate change effects such as sea-level rise are almost certain. What these outcomes mean for different populations, however, is far less certain. Climate change is both a narrative and material phenomenon. In so being, understanding climate change requires broad conceptualizations that incorporate multiple voices and recognize the agency of vulnerable populations. In climate change discourse, climate mobility is often characterized as the production of 'refugees', with a tendency to discount long histories of ordinary mobility among affected populations. The case of Tuvalu in the Pacific juxtaposes migration as everyday practice with climate refugee narratives. This climate-exposed population is being problematically positioned to speak for an entire planet under threat. Tuvaluans are being used as the immediate evidence of displacement that the climate change crisis narrative seems to require. Those identified as imminent climate refugees are being held up like ventriloquists to present a particular (western) 'crisis of nature'. Yet Tuvaluan conceptions of climate challenges and mobility practices show that more inclusive sets of concepts and tools are needed to equitably and effectively approach and characterize population mobility.

Keywords: climate refugees; migration; adaptation; everyday practice; Tuvalu

1. Introduction

How do climate change narratives affect populations identified as likely victims of climate change? Climate change is both a discursive and material phenomenon. To understand its effects fully, analysts must integrate perspectives, values and knowledges of people who live in climate change affected places along with the biophysical changes occurring. In small Pacific islands, these changes include sea level rise, coastal erosion, increased incidence of drought, coral bleaching, and storm surges (Mimura et al., 2007). Dominant, global narratives about climate change, such as climate refugee discourses, can entrench vulnerable communities in inequitable power relations, redirecting their fate from their hands. The abstractions of time, space and belonging which dominant climate change narratives often assume are not universally shared. Rather, cultural values and practices of particular groups of people in particular places are important for understanding the meanings and consequences of climate change. Local people have their own assessments of changing ecological and climatological patterns, such as ocean tides, and the meanings of engagement with globalized discourses of climate change science, politics and economics (e.g., Cruikshank, 2005; Marino and Schweitzer 2009). For people identified as future 'climate refugees', it is important to consider such people's own experiences of mobility. As Crate and Nuttall explain, 'as the earth literally changes beneath their feet, it is vital to understand the cognitive

reverberations and cultural implications to a people's sense of homeland and place' (2009, p.13).

Vulnerability, or the susceptibility to damage, in the face of climate change results from conditions and systemic power relations on the ground. It is not a pure product of climate variability or events (Lazrus, 2009a; Ribot, 2010). As Oliver-Smith (2002: 23-48) explains: "Disasters [and the vulnerability and risks which they expose] exist as material events and, at the same time, as a multiplicity of interwoven, often conflicting, social constructions ... situated variously within society according to political, social, and economic practices and institutions." Through the channels of international development agencies, research institutions, non-governmental organisations, consultancies and investigative journalism, a climate change crisis discourse has emerged, involving climate change experts, advocates and sceptics making wide-ranging claims over a range of vulnerable people and places (Bravo, 2009). Climate vulnerable populations are being positioned as victims, but also as evidence of the climate crisis (Bravo, 2009; Farbotko, 2010a; 2010b; Terry, 2009). While a romanticised conflation of the interests of 'nature' with those of the indigenous or rural poor is not a new phenomenon (Malkki 1992), what is different for climate vulnerable populations is the extensive scaling up of the 'crisis of nature' discourse along temporal and spatial axes, and with it, the representational and material burdens that vulnerable populations (generally among those least involved in producing climate damage) are being made to bear. Thus it is important to ask, even if the interests of climate vulnerable populations are ostensibly at the heart of the crisis discourse, are their voices effectively marginalised by the imposition of alien conceptual frameworks? Climate is changing, but its meanings are contingent on place and history and cannot be imposed from above without risk of disjunctures and injustices.

In the context of Pacific island communities facing sea-level rise, the notion of crisis manifests in highly circulated representations of displaced islanders as future climate refugees (Lazrus, 2009a), identities which have been strongly contested by those who live on these islands. Rather than being the expression solely of crisis, population mobility is at the core of islanders' pasts and presents. Ursula Rakova, of the Carteret Islands in Papua New Guinea, writes about the people of her island's response to the climate refugee discourse and the challenge of rising sea levels in terms of 'sailing the waves on our own':

> For some time now, Carteret Islanders have made eye-catching headlines: "Going, going… Papua New Guinea atoll sinking fast". Academics have dubbed us amongst the world's first "environmental refugees" and journalists put us on the "frontline of climate change" ….We do not need labels but action…Tired of empty promises, the Carterets Council of Elders formed a non-profit association in late 2006 to organise the voluntary relocation of most of the Carterets' population of 3,300. The association was named Tulele Peisa, which means "sailing the waves on our own". This name

> choice reflects the elders' desire to see Carteret Islanders remain strong and self-reliant, not becoming dependent on food handouts for their survival (Rakova, 2009, n.p.).

Rakova's narrative is highly critical of the 'climate refugee' subjectivity. She refuses to see her community as future refugees, viewing such a label as detrimental to community strength and resilience. Similarly, at Climate Camp (a gathering of climate activists) in Newcastle, Australia, in July 2008, it was observed that *Friends of the Earth* representatives campaigning to 'save the climate refugees' received with utter dismay a statement made by President Tong, of Kiribati (a Pacific atoll-state facing significant sea level rise). He stated on Australian national radio that the people of Kiribati do not want to leave their homeland as environmental refugees. Instead, they wanted training to become skilled migrants (ABC, 2008). Maria Tiimon (2010), a climate activist from Kiribati, also rejects a climate refugee 'solution' as too simplistic: 'Some of us might think climate change is just about moving people to a safer place. But it's about equity, identity and human rights'.

Perspectives akin to those articulated by Rakova ,Tong and Tiimon are explored in detail in this paper for the case of Tuvalu, a country comprised entirely of low-lying coral islands and atolls, whose Polynesian population of approximately 10,000 has experienced the notion of climate refugees as a discursive force with significant experiential and emotional effects. We recognize an expanding body of literature critical of the simplistic equation that climate change will result in increased migration (e.g. Dun and Gemenne, 2008; Hartmann, 2010). We do not, however, attempt to present a thorough review of this literature here (see Oliver-Smith, 2009 for a discussion of climate change and population displacement). Rather, our intention is to take a step back from the debate over environmentally influenced migration and create space for multiple and under-represented voices on the experience of climate change (Kelman, 2010). We take seriously the insight that questions about migration only take on meaning in political-economic contexts specific to those migrations and discourses (Lawson, 2000; Lilomaiava-Doktor, 2009). Understanding how the climate refugee discourse plays out among climate-risk communities thus becomes an important task. Climate refugee discourse fashions social change on island populations, and social contexts shape the unfolding of climate refugee discourses in an iterative process (e.g. Barnett and Adger, 2003). These are forces that need to be understood, alongside and interacting with the material effects of climate change. We explore how dominant, global narratives about climate change, such as climate refugee discourses, can entrench vulnerable communities in inequitable power relations, further redirecting their fate from their hands.

Tuvaluans are considered highly vulnerable in the face of climate change primarily because of the susceptibility of the islands they inhabit to sea level rise. While difficult to project for specific places and times, sea levels are estimated to rise globally up to 0.79m by the end of the 21st century (Bindoff et al., 2007). The

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change submits that larger rises are possible due to melting of land ice in Greenland and Antarctica (IPCC 2007). Other research indicates that it is the extremes in sea level that will be most problematic under uncertain sea level rise scenarios (Hunter 2010). As we shall explore, as the climate has become an issue of global crisis, the figure of the disempowered climate refugee has been circulated by outsiders to attempt to provide evidence of the climate change impacts in Tuvalu, a victim subjectivity reliant on embodied displacement and articulated distress. Captured wading through floods in photo-journalism and documentaries, those identified as imminent climate refugees thus become symbols of a particular (western) 'crisis of nature'; a crisis that does not necessarily graft cleanly to Tuvaluans' own views of nature. Evidence-hungry climate change and climate policy debate has shifted alternative perspectives on climate effects, voiced and experienced by vulnerable populations themselves, to the periphery. We make a case for exploring alternative articulations and experiences of climate change effects in Tuvalu that do not map sea-level rise singularly to a nation of future refugees.

We adopt a Foucaultian sense of discourse to refer to the ways in which social practices that frame events draw on particular sets of ideas, concepts or categories that are then produced, reproduced or altered, informing how people relate to each other and the non-human world (Foucault, 1972). Climate refugee discourses are understandings of the world that are actively and continually negotiated as part of their production. Representations of climate refugees, like any representations, are neither static nor innocent. According to Foucault, they are vehicles for power, characterised by fluid, ongoing claims of inclusion and exclusion, dependent on the interests of those engaged in them. As we shall explore, dominant representations of adaptation to climate change that centralise climate refugees are devoid of appropriate cultural meaning and fail to take into account existing resilience, including migration practices, among the populations exposed to sea level rise. In other words, the discourse of climate refugee protection can, by attempting to entrench climate refugees as *the* truth about effects of sea level rise on small islands, disregard cultural and political resilience among the population that is in part embedded in existing mobilities. In climate change research and policy, migration is often, problematically, posited as a process separate or distinct from adaptation (Warner et. al., 2009; Raleigh and Jordan, 2010). Yet, a reconceptualisation of the relationship between migration and adaptation among institutions is desirable: mobility needs to be seen as a potential part of the solution rather than an inherent problem (Tacoli, 2009).

Climate exposed populations, including Tuvaluans, are magnets for media and researchers, often from the industrialised world (Farbotko, 2010a; 2010b; Lazrus, 2009a; 2009b). It was with such issues in mind that we undertook our respective separate doctoral studies in Tuvalu over the course of several visits form 2004 to 2007. Fieldwork consisting of participant observation and interviews yielded data drawn on here. Our research both contributes to, and attempts to critique, climate change discourse about Tuvalu. It is a necessarily situated and partial practice, and not exempt from the critical scrutiny we apply to the practices of journalists and

environmental non-government organisations (ENGOs). Our identities and characteristics impact upon our research agenda, practices and outcomes (Butler, 2005; Haraway, 1991). Noting our position as western scholars, we do not attempt to speak for Islanders. Nevertheless, we have tried to adopt a listening disposition, with a goal of bringing into critical conversation Islander concerns (on their terms) with globalised climate discourses. We view this type of conversation as necessary in the interests of advancing, even if only minutely, the enormous imperative of climate justice (Adger et al., 2006).

2. Climate refugee discourse

The conceptual lineage of the term 'climate refugee' relates closely to that of 'environmental refugee', a term used to describe people who undergo forced migration related to environmental change. While migration linked to deteriorating environmental conditions is not a new phenomenon, the concept of environmental refugees emerged in the 1970s in parallel with environmental crises, particularly desertification in Africa. Both 'environmental refugee' and 'climate refugee' are invoked to describe populations that have been displaced or are at risk of displacement associated with environmental change (climate change in significant part). Neither attracts the legal protection applied to those designated as political refugees by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.[1] The term climate refugee specifically has been mobilised to describe large numbers of people predicted to be permanently or temporarily displaced by climate change effects such as drought, desertification, deforestation, soil erosion, water shortages and rising sea levels (Myers, 1995; Biermann and Boas, 2010). There has been extensive debate about present and future numbers of environmental and climate refugees, how they might be protected under international law, and how such protection might be advanced (e.g. Myers, 2002; Biermann and Boas, 2010). Lack of legal protection in itself has become a significant issue, the resolution of which is seen by some to offer the desirable solution to the problem of populations that live in places affected by sea-level rise (e.g. Biermann and Boas, 2010). Low-lying islands in the Pacific are frequently considered to be on the frontline of climate-related displacement, but diverse populations in Asia, Africa and Latin America are also facing the issue of climate-related migration (Warner et. al., 2009; Tacoli, 2009).

For political ecologists, the difference that climate change makes to vulnerable populations often involves deepening of an already complex story about the distribution of and access to resources as diverse as water, land, infrastructure, institutions, capital, the rule of law, kinship networks, education, aid and mobility just to name a few (Black, 2001; Tacoli, 2009; Ribot, 2010). From this perspective, it becomes necessary to challenge notions of mobility framed as a pathological

[1] The United Nations 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol to the Convention define refugees as people outside their state of nationality or former residence who, owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, are unwilling or unable to return to it.

condition of uprootedness (Malkki, 1992) and explore, more broadly, how the effects of climate change exacerbate and rearrange the landscape of poverty, justice, and migration. Rather than think of climate change as a unidirectional driver of migration, then, it is important to consider climate change and mobility as part of a web of vectors which can operate in different directions depending on the circumstances of the people, place and power relations in question (Tacoli, 2009; Black, 2001). Black (1998), for instance, has demonstrated that a combination of social conditions such as political instability, violent conflict, extreme poverty, and corruption can go hand-in-hand with environmental degradation to create conditions for displacement and/or inadequate disaster recovery. Yet the term 'climate refugee' reinforces the view that climate is a unilinear vector, forcing unwanted migration. Thus the environment appears to compel the creation of refugees, making less visible the fact that it is often institutional and human response, and the economic or social circumstances of a marginalised population, that can turn a situation like a drought or a flood into a disaster (Ribot, 2010).

Definitions of 'climate refugee' are shaped by an assumption that the term can apply to any of the diverse climate vulnerable populations around the world. For example:

> people who have to leave their **habitats**, *immediately or in the near future*, because of sudden or gradual alterations in their natural environment related to at least one of three impacts of climate change: sea-level rise, extreme weather events, and drought and water scarcity (Bierman and Boas 2010, both emphases added).

What is troubling about this definition is that it takes for granted, and helps to naturalise, a climate crisis discourse while minimising the possibility of taking difference into account – whether difference in regard to cultural, political, or economic context or the manifestation of climate change effects. The word 'habitat' used in the above definition is an essentially ecological term. Used in the context of climate refugees it recalls problematic representations of indigenous and developing world populations as inevitably 'rooted' in the territory in which they live, like plant species, as a kind of force of nature - while wealthy westerners uncritically embrace their freedom to be highly mobile global citizens, decoupled from nature (Malkki, 1992). Placing emphasis on uprootedness and rupture, and shiftings from periphery to core, the climate refugee discourse is underpinned by a set of spatial assumptions that position people displaced by climate change in terms of very particular migration vectors: the flow of displaced people is often deemed to inevitably originate in the developing world, and have as destination the industrialised, (usually western) world (Malkki, 1992; Tacoli, 2009). Yet international migration only accounts for a small proportion of all mobility and much of it occurs within regions rather than towards high-income countries (Tacoli, 2009). Future climate-related migration (small islands excepting) is largely expected to be within national borders (Warner et. al., 2009).

Making assumptions about the type and direction of migration tends to bypass two issues. Firstly, who is insisting that populations will migrate to the developed world following displacement associated with climate change? Secondly, what policy mechanisms may enable populations to migrate in ways that do not result in the necessity for refugee status and are congruent with local practices and preferences? When such questions are bypassed, the sensationalism of the term 'climate refugees' is too easily answered by reactionary policies preventing movement without genuine concern for the welfare of populations involved (Warner et. al., 2009). Hartmann (2010) argues that climate refugee narratives can, through mobilising racist fears of a dangerous poor, protect the interests of national security in the west, increasing rather than addressing fundamental issues of social inequality.

The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) usefully defines 'environmentally induced migrants' as mobile subjects with agency in a changing environment:

> persons or groups of persons who, for compelling reasons of sudden or progressive changes in the environment that adversely affect their lives or living conditions, are obliged to leave their habitual homes, or choose to do so, either temporarily or permanently, and who move either within their country or abroad (Warner et. al., 2009, p.2).

We approach the term 'climate refugee' with caution and as a regime of contested truth, not because we are sceptical that migration linked to climate change is a real and important issue, nor because we dismiss outright a need for climate refugee policy. Rather, we recognise that while climate refugee protection measures might be appropriate and in some cases necessary for climate vulnerable populations, especially in small islands, they do not offer sufficient conceptual or policy tools for equitable approaches to the issue of climate-related migration. Widely different physical and social contexts of climate vulnerable populations need to be taken into account.

3. Globalized climate refugee discourses: representing Tuvalu

'Climate refugee' is a 'category that is increasingly applied in a naturalised, unproblematised way to entire nationalities of people in the Pacific region' (McNamara and Gibson, 2009, p.476). If, as a Foucaultian analysis suggests, 'climate refugee' is a 'truth' with which the phenomenon of sea-level rise for small islands has become almost inextricably associated over time, how does this truth shape adaptation pathways? This section offers a critical examination of the way the term climate refugee has been deployed in climate change debate in the Pacific, specifically in relation to Tuvalu. It is important to explore the ways in which ideas

about climate refugees have become dominant interpretations of the social consequences of projected sea-level rise. Researchers and activists must question the power relations embedded in imaginings of islander refugees and inundated island landscapes. But most significantly, it is critical to explore what refugee categorisation means among the populations so described: used strategically by them; modified by others; used to trigger emotions; and, an idea to be strongly resisted. It is important to explore the ways in which ideas about climate refugees have become dominant interpretations of the social consequences of projected sea-level rise, to question the power relations embedded in imaginings of islander refugees and inundated island landscapes, and most significantly, to explore what this categorisation means among the populations so described: used strategically by them; modified; as triggering of emotions; and, an idea to be strongly resisted.

While Tuvalu is a place largely without political violence, absolute poverty or disrespect for human rights, the population faces many challenges quite apart from climate change: harnessing and managing extensive fisheries resources; coping with the impacts of global economic downturns for the significant part of the population employed as commercial seafarers; overcrowding on the capital; and lack of employment on the outer islands. Yet it is climate refugee stories that sell news. Reports of the 'first' climate refugees frequently appear on news websites, blogs and websites of various civil society organisations. Further, it is the issue of opening or closing western borders to climate refugees that is frequently the scandal that constitutes the newsworthiness of climate refugee stories, rather than the plight of displaced people in and of itself (Farbotko, 2005; Lazrus, 2009a).

The high circulation of climate refugee narratives is produced in response to the invisibility of much climate change phenomena to the naked eye or layperson's perspective. Apparently graspable concepts and visible entities have become crucial ways to help lay publics engaging with the climate change debate. Journalists and ENGOs have undertaken the translation of complex climate change phenomena into event-based, visualisable narratives (Doyle, 2007). Melting glaciers, stranded polar bears and disappearing islands seem to provide tangible signifiers through which climate change can be made knowable to those unfamiliar with scientific climate models. In an era of continuing scepticism and inaction on climate change, these signifiers are more than pedagogical, they are highly political, implicated in the production of climate change as a crisis.

Indeed, Tuvalu is consistently being imagined (by outsiders rather than inhabitants) as a laboratory and a litmus test for the effects of climate change on the planet. Tuvalu's status as experimental space is often expressed through the metaphor of the canary in the coal-mine: 'The metaphorical force of the canary in the coalmine rests with the idea that the canary – the Tuvalu islands – is not valuable in and of itself but rather is in service to a larger (global) environmental purpose' (Farbotko, 2010b, p.54). This imagining of Tuvalu as a litmus test for the planet is not scientifically accurate, but is a political appropriation of the space of an already

marginalised population by those who expect tangible manifestations of the statistical abstractions that derive from climate science.

Like melting glaciers and polar bears, those named as climate refugees are enrolled into international ENGO and media narratives as subjects to represent climate damage. However, unlike glaciers and polar bears, who have no capacity to verbalise, climate refugees appear as subjects who seem to speak directly for the climate. The use of Tuvaluan faces, and Tuvaluan voices, is a strategy deployed regularly by international ENGOs seeking to raise awareness of climate change. Aware that many of their stakeholders will never witness the islands first-hand, Tuvaluans are recruited and funded to travel to environmentalist fora abroad, and have their image and words recorded on ENGO internet sites and documentaries: attempts to both personalise and personify climate change impacts[2]. Yet it is important to query the extent to which the appearance of Tuvaluan faces and voices is a form of ventriloquy – making Tuvaluans speak for and further the interests of the international ENGOs. It cannot be assumed that the interests of climate refugees and ENGOs are always congruent, even if they often overlap. For example, Siuila Toloa, director of Tuvaluan ENGO *Island Care*, has been recruited to appear in *Friends of the Earth* Climate Justice Tour in Australia and as a *WWF South Pacific* Climate Witness. Both *Friends of the Earth* and *WWF* are international ENGOs. An extract from Toloa's Climate Justice Tour speech indicates how she places herself, as a Tuvaluan directly affected by climate change, with regard to an issue of equity:

> *How often have you heard someone argue that climate change is not their business? That it has no impact on anyone else? Today I'm here and I'd like to take a closer look at the problem … The small low island states … are affected by the gross impact of climate change. The small island states contribute insignificantly to global emissions, but suffer most*.

Toloa went on to emphasise the climate refugee scenario as very much the last resort for Tuvaluans in adapting to climate change. While Toloa was offered a seemingly useful opportunity to frame her climate change concerns within the 'climate justice' framework of the tour, there was also a problematic representational dynamic set in motion by the tour, the aim of which was to promote renewable energy projects in the Pacific. To the extent that climate vulnerable populations, represented here by Toloa, are bundled with the inanimate climate, as articulated by the tour's organisers, these populations become objectified. They function less as human subjects and more as *evidence of climate damage*. The motivation for the circulation of narratives about or from them by international ENGOs is to use them as evidence for reducing carbon emissions rather than as the focus of adaptation policies, even if ostensibly they are given the opportunity to speak as subjects in need of protection against climate change effects. For the Tuvaluan activists involved, there is a tension between balancing

[2] Chambers and Chambers (2007) review five such documentaries.

opportunities to speak to international audiences about their concerns on their terms, with the ways in which they are framed by western fora organisers in terms of embodied evidence of a damaged global climate.

Interestingly, the failure of Tuvalu and Tuvaluans to provide the right sort of 'evidence' to environmentalists – such that would definitively topple climate scepticism - is clear in the reflections of an Australian ENGO representative who visited Tuvalu:

> *If there is any concrete evidence in the world of climate change it would be Tuvalu. And this was my opportunity to see it. A country predicted to disappear in 50 years would surely show some indisputable signs ... In visiting Tuvalu I hoped to discover and reaffirm a purpose for what I do, particularly given the atmosphere of scepticism and uncertainty that sometimes surrounds the issue of climate change. In the course of my stay in Tuvalu, this tangible and convincing evidence I was hunting for seemed to constantly slip from my grasp (and with it, my much desired 'justification' for my work)* (Anonymous, 2005, n.p.).

Alofa Tuvalu, a French ENGO, has taken a different approach to Tuvaluans as 'evidence' in climate change debate: Tuvaluans are heroized in romanticised visions of the people and their islands as suitably 'close to nature' in a project to transform their islands into a place powered by 100 per cent renewable energy sources. According to Farbotko (2010a), *Alofa Tuvalu* has taken on the task of using Tuvalu to educate the population of the entire planet in consuming less in order to attain a global, sustainable equilibrium between production and consumption. For this ENGO, the question of climate change has become one of reconciling a lost link between environmental values and daily life, and Tuvaluans are enrolled as model environmental citizens in this quest (Farbotko, 2010a). Tuvaluans are somewhat unfairly expected to significantly reduce their energy consumption and emissions, and play their part in solving a problem that is not of their making, even though such actions alone could never stem the flood of northern carbon.

Media narratives and ENGO campaigns can have significant effects. The term climate refugee was put into circulation by researchers studying future climate change, has been taken up by journalists hunting for a climate refugee scoop, and is becoming the basis for policy development. The Australian Green Party, for example, proposed a bill to legislate a climate refugee visa in 2007 (NSW Greens, 2007), justified in part on the widely circulated media report that New Zealand is 'accepting 75 climate refugees' from Tuvalu per year (eg. Baker, 2007). While the New Zealand Government does accept up to 75 Tuvaluan migrants per year, the scheme operates as part of the Pacific Access Category. It is an economic rather than a humanitarian migration policy and does not originate from any consideration of climate change impacts in the Pacific islands. However, inaccurately labelling it an environmental

refugee program clearly has greater news value, the effect of which perhaps suggests to media publics that Tuvaluans have bilateral legal protection as climate refugees when they do not.

The climate refugee discourse, as relating to islanders, has become to some extent self-sustaining; the more that climate refugees are reported upon by journalists and environmentalists, the greater the imperative to report on, and 'save' them as victims, regardless of whether alternative migration strategies are being voiced by or put into practice by the populations themselves. Indeed, the search for evidence of climate change effects on vulnerable populations is starting to fulfil the climate refugee narratives' prophecy. Climate refugee discourse morphed into a false representation of reality, for example, in Al Gore's documentary *An inconvenient truth*, which claims 'the citizens of these Pacific nations have all had to evacuate to New Zealand' with photographs of a flooded Tuvalu (Gore, 2006; see Farbotko, 2010b). In Tuvalu, the weight of a globalized journalistic discourse falls heavily on a population of only 10,000. As a new political arena forms around climate vulnerable populations as 'refugees', it is crucial to ask: are these climate subjects being accorded agency as well as having the protection of their rights as migrants debated (Lazrus, 2009b)?

In sum, the image of the climate refugee is sustained as a sort of victim-commodity, providing news value, political point-scoring, and a human embodiment of climate change 'evidence' for western environmental activists concerned with saving the planet (Farbotko, 2010a). Climate refugee narratives have evoked a particularly narrow range of subject positions for inhabitants of Tuvalu – either a helpless victim or a climate hero - in a dependent relation with powerful groups in the developed world (see also Kempf, 2009). These subjectivities are a means for political constituencies elsewhere to relationally construct their own role in the reflection of their small island neighbours (Said, 1978; Fry, 1997; Farbotko, 2010b). Even when the west is imagined as a space of salvation for those from 'the disappearing islands' in a climate change crisis, islanders are reduced to being necessary recipients of the compassion and protection of the west, as fearful climate refugees. When islanders are imagined to have an *inevitable* destiny as climate refugees, causal and singular links of meaning between sea level rise and climate refugees are constructed. A vision of the future is created that depends on assumptions that sea level rise has a singular, inevitable meaning for islanders. This position is, arguably, one that tends toward environmental determinism and allows little room for consideration of the politics, policy and power that also shape the ways in which displaced populations come into being. While the outcome of projected sea level rise is likely to be migration, the consequences are socially constructed and managed by powerful forces of discourse and consequent policy.

4. Beyond climate refugees

4. 1 Climate change discourses in Tuvalu

Several ethnographic studies suggest to us that solidarity and presenting an image of a cohesive community are important in Tuvalu, and must be taken into account in examining climate change discourse there (Besnier, 2000; Chambers and Chambers, 2002; Goldsmith, 2000; Lazrus, 2009a). In terms of future visioning of climate change, community solidarity appears to be at work. The dominant version of climate change in Tuvalu rejects the image of climate refugees. This local discourse has been captured by studies undertaken by McNamara and Gibson (2009), Mortreux and Barnett (2008), McAdam and Loughry (2009) and Paton and Fairbairn-Dunlop (2010). McNamara and Gibson (2009) drew on interviews with Pacific representatives to the United Nations, finding a dominant view among them that rejected the identity of the climate refugee being attached to the populations they represented: 'exodus was simply not part of an acceptable future scenario' (McNamara and Gibson, 2009, 479). This finding captures a political message directed at an international audience. The message prioritises emissions reductions and refuses to accept that climate refugee protection alone is sufficient to address the diverse, significant and complex social changes that are likely to occur in small islands in the future. Indeed, climate refugee discourse perpetuates a secondary disaster if it provides a disincentive for development agencies to fund projects in Tuvalu (Lazrus, 2011).

Perceptions among Tuvaluan civil society are often strongly rejecting of the reductionism of climate refugee narratives. The prospect of migration coupled with a designation as refugee is perceived as denying Tuvaluans the right to a subjectivity and voice as an equal citizen of the global community:

> *We wouldn't like to eventually get forced out of our place and be classed as environmental refugees. That has a negative attachment to it. It's like considering ourselves like second-class citizens in the future. It devalues your feelings as a human being. It makes you feel small and negative about yourself. And it doesn't make you fully human. And the question is, who has the right to deny myself the joy of feeling human, of feeling fully human? Because we are born equal and we should be treated equally* (NGO Director, Funafuti, Tuvalu, Interview, 25 August 2005).

Similarly:

> *What we want to demonstrate is that: we are not happy to be labelled victims and where is the glory in being titled "first Environmental refugees"? We*

> *know our rights. We want support in gaining better education and medical facilities for our people. Stop using us as points in global indicators of Corporate misgoverning. Give us real solutions that will empower us to make sustainable choices as we adapt to our changing environment* (Emeretta Cross, 22 Sep 2009, email sent to Tuvalu Yahoo Groups mailing list).

These statements are an assertion of political, cultural and territorial rights that are seen by these Tuvaluans to be marginalised in climate refugee debate. Indeed, they are a call from Tuvaluan civil society for a reframing of the debate on the future of their country in terms of human rights and global citizenship.

Government discourse on climate change in Tuvalu, on the other hand, is often characterised by self-identification as vulnerable, a strategy which captures the seriousness of climate risks, and draws attention to the need for international responses. This discourse can be distinguished from that of the international ENGOs and media in the way that it emphasises political, cultural, and territorial rights. The vulnerability discourse, however, is mobilised by outsiders for different purposes: to sell news, to save earth, to turn attention away from the drivers of climate change contributing to small island states' continuing position as marginal to international political and economic interests (Barnett and Campbell, 2010). The Tuvaluan Parliament has attempted to maintain some control over externally produced climate change discourse on Tuvalu, particularly as circulated by foreign journalists. A motion was passed in the Tuvaluan Parliament, 'that the Government of Tuvalu should be more aware of the journalists who are coming into the country' (Tuvalu Parliament, 2005, n.p.). The rationale for this motion was described thus:

> *There are so many different views given to these journalists, that is why we bring up this issue for it can really affect our country in some ways. Some say that Tuvalu is sinking as the result of sea level rise, but some say that all this is not true at all. The main objective of the motion is that the Government should have a particular body or contact point that can meet with these journalists. So when these people come they don't need to look around for information because there's these appointed people that could answer their queries. But if these journalists still want more information from our citizens then everything could be organized by the contact point* (Hon. Kausea Natano, cited in Tuvalu Parliament, 2005, n.p.).

The activities of journalists and others, such as researchers, were debated in Parliament as an important mechanism for maintaining control over the preferred position on climate change. Also at issue was profit made to media corporations, at Tuvalu's expense:

> *Of course these people should be screened, they can't just enter the country to come and produce documentaries for their earnings, especially when they are big and well known companies* (Hon. Alesana K. Seluka, cited in Tuvalu Parliament 2005, n.p.).

The Parliamentary motion, although it did not eventuate in stopping the flow of journalists into the country, shows that an official discourse shaped by dominant Tuvaluan interests is viewed as highly desirable at the level of national government in Tuvalu (see also McAdam and Loughry, 2009). Indeed, many people in Tuvalu are experts in climate change discourse, and have been interviewed multiple times by researchers, journalists and documentary makers. Such experts, often in bureaucratic or leadership positions, are informally yet powerfully socially positioned to interact with foreigners and many reproduce the state position on climate change, which has not changed significantly since the Paeniu administration in the early 1990s. On the other hand, anyone visiting Tuvalu as an outsider is in a weak position from which to engage with inhabitants not already positioned as spokespeople on climate change issues.

It might be argued that Tuvaluans can benefit from media attention, which other vulnerable people may wish for and do without. However, one instance when such an argument may have been substantiated – at the Copenhagen Conference of Parties – in fact resulted in the opposite. The Tuvaluan delegation firmly maintained a position of vulnerability, and made significant waves in the negotiations and in the media insisting that a 1.5 degree Celsius temperature limit be agreed. Meanwhile, the government of Kiribati made an agreement with the Australian Prime Minister to get better access to adaptation funding, in return for relinquishing their commitment to a 1.5 degree Celsius increase (Farbotko and McGregor 2010).

4.2 Understanding migration in Tuvalu through everyday practice

We argue that any attempt to understand climate change in Tuvalu involves questioning how people ordinarily use and make spaces and places for themselves within and across national borders, in relation to land and ocean, as well as understanding the narratives within which climate change issues are articulated.

Migration, often back and forth (which involves some different challenges and opportunities to those of permanent migration), is part of everyday life in Tuvalu, whose economy is characterized by its reliance on migration, remittances, aid, and bureaucracy (the government sector as the dominant cash employer) (Bertram and Watters, 1985). For Tuvaluans, migration is rarely an exercise of individualistic opportunism; instead, it is a collectively negotiated means of participation in transnational networks, a way to meet family obligations and desires (Munro, 1990). Indeed, by generating remittances to the islands and nurturing social connections that extend back to and also beyond the islands, Tuvaluans living, studying and working overseas, although bodily absent from national territory, are acting very

much in the national interest. While migration is part of everyday life, it is not currently a highly traumatic process. Indeed, a Tuvaluan sense of history is strongly connected to mobility:

> *We have been moving in history. Tuvaluans have been moving from place to place all the time. We have moved from island to island* (Audience member 1, USP Tuvalu Campus Public Seminar, Funafuti, 12 August 2005).

This is not a history unique to Tuvalu, but one shared among the small islands of the Pacific, where seafaring, oceanic and mobile cosmologies are profoundly important. Land, although extremely significant, does not delimit Pacific economic, social, and cultural values. Rather, the ocean is an important bonding element and a bridge of connectivity between communities (Hau'ofa 1998).

This is not to say that Tuvaluan people are disengaged from the issue of eventual relocation, and its complex intertwinings with culture and identity:

> *Do we have to migrate in order to lose our culture? Because we could lose our culture by just remaining where we are. Given time, we could lose it, either totally or we could change it … culture is an evolving thing. It is changing. So wherever we go or wherever we stay, culture is still evolving and changing* (Audience member 1, USP Tuvalu Campus Public Seminar, Funafuti, 12 August 2005).

> *Even if we migrate, I do not feel comfortable with the word 'loss of culture'. Today in New Zealand, despite a fair community in New Zealand, a Tuvaluan community, they do maintain their identity as Tuvaluans, and that means they practice their culture, even though they have left Tuvalu for better opportunities. But they maintain the community, they meet quite frequently, they play certain Tuvaluan games, they get together and they dance* (Audience member 2, USP Tuvalu Campus Public Seminar, Funafuti, 12 August 2005).

These extracts make clear that migration in Tuvalu does not stand in opposition to place-based cultures. Migration and cultural change are not necessarily crises, as they are currently ordinary practices of everyday life. When the trajectories of Tuvaluan migration are charted, the insularity of Tuvalu disappears and the strong social and economic ties of Tuvaluans, reaching around the globe, offer a very different picture to that of the distressed, uprooted refugee. It is not migration in and of itself that involves significant threat to the way Tuvaluan people imagine their future, but how sea level rise is framed and governed. Thousands of Tuvaluans live in New Zealand, having moved there not because of some immediate flooding

imperative, but because of ever-increasing webs of involvement with New Zealand formed by educational, employment, environmental and familial needs and opportunities that now extend back and forth between Tuvalu and New Zealand.

Despite these local views and practices, foreign voices are persisting with climate refugee narratives about Tuvalu to map their own concerns with territorial roots and national boundaries onto islander worlds. These imposed narratives obscure the cultural strengths in the semi-rooted, semi-moving ways of being on small islands. Migration in and of itself does not constitute the scandal of climate change from a Tuvaluan perspective, rather it is the prospect of permanent loss of land and self-determination, particularly if there is no forthcoming remedy for these losses from those who caused the damage. In the eyes of Tuvaluans, permission to cross a western border as a refugee falls far short of the climate change remedies required: extensive, immediate reductions in global greenhouse gas emissions, and significant legal and financial action to redress lost livelihoods and self-determination if emissions reduction is not achieved. 'Adaptation' policy that ignores these local views is likely to remain ill-suited to the realities of Tuvaluan lives. In Tuvalu, migration can be considered a source of economic and social strength for Tuvaluans adapting to climate change in the long term, rather than, necessarily, a chronic 'problem' to be 'solved'. Just as important for Tuvaluans (and requiring significant further research and policy attention) are Tuvaluan cultural values, national identity, ongoing practices of migration and change, sovereignty, and compensation (Yamamoto and Esteban, 2010; Oels, 2010).

5. Conclusion

Climate change related migration is likely to be a reality, but it need not be a refugee crisis in the Pacific. Climate exposed populations are being positioned by foreign actors to represent an entire planet under threat as the climate change crisis discourse demands immediate evidence of the crisis it names (Bravo, 2009; Farbotko, 2010a; 2010b; Terry, 2009). The circulation of climate refugee narratives affects those it identifies as likely victims of climate crisis, producing new configurations of inequity. We have shown how 'climate refugee' has become a truth claim in the Foucauldian sense, along with contestations and effects of this identification among those it seeks to name. Recognising that in a world where movement across international borders is tightly regulated and border politics of fear deploys considerable power, the term climate refugee must also be recognised as politically charged. Our concern in this paper has been with bringing into greater visibility islander perspectives on climate change and migration that add everyday practices to the debate – representing migration as ordinary activity, that cannot be assumed to be positive or negative without reference to the values and perspectives of the specific population involved. We posit that islander perspectives and practices offer alternatives for equitable and effective policy to address climate vulnerability in the Pacific. A strong alternative perspective is emanating from Tuvaluan civil society, with calls for a reframing of the debate on the future of the country in terms of human rights and global citizenship. It is beyond the scope of this paper to posit

details of an alternative framework. We call upon lawyers and scholars who study international relations as well as Tuvaluan decision makers to build upon our cultural analysis.

As island populations table various alternative visions of future migration, it becomes apparent that equitable climate change governance requires greater openness to islander emotions, values, mobilities and spaces. These should not be enshrined as a singular source of climate change 'solutions'. Rather, drawing on the case of Tuvalu, we show, by foregrounding islander perspectives, how questions about sea level rise and relocation might be framed differently, and alternative ways of understanding and experiencing sea level rise on small islands may become valued. Importantly, climate change risks for small island states cannot be addressed solely by climate refugee policies. Land-based adaptation strategies, defined by existing national and sub-national boundaries, are important, but so too is an injection into adaptation debates of different possibilities for, and experiences of, migration across these boundaries. Tuvaluan identity and belonging is partly constituted in migration which can only be fully known through everyday practice (Lazrus, 2009a). A more balanced approach should include people's indigenous knowledge and understanding of their movements, as well as the structural, economic, and political environments in which they are enmeshed Lilomaiava-Doktor (2009). While the climate refugee discourse is resisted, the issue of migration is nevertheless bound up in everyday life in Tuvalu, in a way that is very distinct from the notion of 'fleeing refugees'. Political instability, violent conflict, extreme poverty, and corruption can go hand-in-hand with environmental degradation to create conditions for displacement (Black, 1998), but none of these conditions are prevalent in Tuvalu whose people are popularly imagined as the world's first climate change refugees. In contrast, communities in Tuvalu tend to have strong subnational and transnational social networks, stable political systems, and a high degree of engagement with climate change debates. Financial and institutional resources (particularly for disaster prevention and recovery) are minimal, but climate change and sea-level rise have been topics of public and government concern on many of these islands for over twenty years. Families and island communities are debating ways in which their culture, identity and right to self-govern will remain theirs if one day the islands become uninhabitable. Media and governance institutions need to tune in more closely to debates at these scales.

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