

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Why Pacific Islanders Stopped Worrying about the Apocalypse and Started Fighting Climate Change

Stuart Kirsch

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Kirsch Climate Change in the Pacific

Stuart Kirsch

Department of Anthropology
University of Michigan

Ann Arbor, MI 48109

(734) 764-2292

skirsch@umich.edu

ABSTRACT This article questions the hierarchical assumptions of theories of “traveling models” by examining how politicians and environmental activists from the three major regions of the Pacific have contributed to global climate change policy regimes. The Marshall Islands successfully lobbied the international climate change community to ensure that the signatories to the Paris Agreement are committed to keeping the global temperature rise during the current century to “well below” 2°C, while “pursuing efforts” to limit the average temperature increase to 1.5°C above preindustrial levels. In its role as the host of the twenty-third annual Conference of the Parties to the 1992 UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, Fiji drew on the self-scaling Pacific speech genre of *talanoa* to facilitate dialogue and cooperation between the signatories of the Paris Agreement. The successful institution of Talanoa Dialogues at UN climate change meetings was not just a branding exercise, but an ideological project of encompassment. Although the Solomon Islands has a lower international profile, its responses to climate change suggest new ways of thinking about the relationship between local environmental knowledge and scientific models, and provides valuable feedback on new forms of aid focused on adaptation. [*climate change, traveling theory, talanoa, Pacific Islands, United Nations*]

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RESUMEN Este artículo cuestiona las asunciones jerárquicas de las teorías de “modelos viajeros” al examinar cómo políticos y activistas ambientales de las tres mayores regiones del Pacífico han contribuido a los regímenes de políticas sobre cambio climático global. Las Islas Marshall presionaron exitosamente la comunidad internacional de cambio climático para asegurar que los signatarios del Acuerdo de París están comprometidos con mantener el aumento de la temperatura global durante el actual siglo “muy por debajo” de 2°C, mientras “dedicando esfuerzos” a limitar el incremento promedio de temperaturas a 1.5°C por encima de los niveles preindustriales. En su papel de anfitrión de la vigésima tercera Conferencia anual de las Partes a la Convención Marco de la Naciones Unidas sobre Cambio Climático de 1992, Fiyi se apoyó en el género discursivo del Pacífico auto-escalable de *talanoa* para facilitar el diálogo y la cooperación entre los signatarios del Acuerdo de París. La institución exitosa de los Diálogos de Talanoa en las reuniones sobre cambio climático de las Naciones Unidas no sólo fue un ejercicio de posicionamiento, sino un proyecto ideológico de inclusión. Aunque las Islas Salomón tienen un perfil internacional más bajo, sus respuestas al cambio climático sugieren nuevas maneras de pensar acerca de la relación entre el conocimiento ambiental local y los modelos científicos, y proveen retroalimentación valiosa sobre las nuevas formas de ayuda enfocada en la adaptación. [*cambio climático, teoría viajera, talanoa, Islas del Pacífico, Naciones Unidas*]

For the majority of the twenty-first century, people living in the Pacific have been told that their atolls are sinking. Their islands becoming unlivable. Their futures already underwater. This narrative and the apocalyptic images that accompany it are circulated by climate change activists and policymakers seeking to convey the consequences of failing to curb global climate change. The vulnerability of these islands and the communities living there to rising sea levels vividly depicts the gravity of the threat from climate change to the entire planet and all of humanity. When reckoning responsibility for these environmental impacts, the people of the Pacific are generally represented as innocent victims of the “overheating” of the planet (Eriksen 2016), despite their acknowledgment that they actively contribute to and participate in the runaway consumption patterns of the global economy (Rudiak-Gould 2014; see also Hall and Sanders 2015).

Should their homelands become uninhabitable due to sea-level rise and the intrusion of saltwater into underground aquifers, the populations of low-lying island nations like Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, and Tuvalu must find other countries willing to accept them. This would make them the world's first nations composed entirely of environmental refugees (Farbotko and Lazrus 2012; McNamara and Gibson 2009). The specter of relocation led Anote Tong, the former president of Kiribati, to promote "migration with dignity," a policy overturned by his successor.ⁱ Kiribati also purchased land in Fiji from the Church of England as a site for future relocation, and Fiji has "offered refuge to the entire populations of Tuvalu and Kiribati in the event that the countries become uninhabitable due to the climate crisis" (Lyons 2019).

Pacific Islanders have previously been displaced by nuclear weapons testing (Johnston and Barker 2008; Kirsch 2001, 2018) and phosphate mining (Teaiwa 2014). Others have participated in voluntary and involuntary labor schemes in neighboring countries since colonial times (Stead and Altman 2019) and continue to emigrate for economic opportunities and other reasons. This includes Marshall Islanders in Arkansas, Samoans in Auckland, and the large and diverse Pacific diaspora in Hawai'i, to name but a few examples of prominent overseas communities. But voluntary migration and the specter of displacement by climate change are very different phenomena, given the potential loss of a homeland to which Pacific Islanders can return (see Kirsch 2001, 176). Pacific Island artists and intellectuals have offered eloquent testimony about the significance of land for their personal and cultural identities (Steiner 2015, 155).ⁱⁱ In addition to the existential dilemmas posed by permanent exile, the threat of rising sea levels to island futures leads people in the Pacific to ponder other mundane but nonetheless important concerns: Can one be the citizen of a country that no longer physically exists? Would they still have access to passports and a national identity? What would happen to their offshore fishing rights, which supply a significant portion of the income for many countries in the region, if their land disappears beneath the sea?

Perhaps surprisingly, most political leaders and environmental activists in the Pacific reject the narrative of sinking islands and forced displacement. They do not contest or deny the occurrence of anthropogenic climate change, however, as the people living in the Pacific have already experienced

its impacts on their daily lives and livelihoods. Some communities in low-lying areas are already being relocated to higher ground, such as Narikoso village on the island of Ono in Kadavu, Fiji (*Fiji Times*, October 7, 2018). Instead, politicians and activists from the Pacific are playing a prominent role in international debates about climate change, calling on the international community to accelerate its efforts to reduce global greenhouse gas emissions. As Enele Sopoaga, during his tenure as prime minister of Tuvalu, argued at climate change meetings sponsored by the United Nations in 2014, “Unless we save Tuvalu, we cannot save the world. Save Tuvalu to save the world” (Lyons 2019). Like Sopoaga, Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama from Fiji and President Hilde Heine from the Marshall Islands reject the passive, sacrificial role scripted for Pacific Islanders by the popular narrative.

Climate change activists from the Pacific also invoke their identities as oceangoing seafarers who settled the Pacific, explaining that they are unafraid of the wind or the waves, which bore them to their ancestral homelands. Embracing the cosmopolitan vision articulated by the late Tongan anthropologist Epeli Hau’ofa (1994, 152) in his influential essay “Our Sea of Islands,” they reject the colonial view of themselves as living on small “islands in a far sea,” destined to dependency on larger nations, a lesson promoting despondency (see Sahlins 1999, iii). In contrast, Hau’ofa (1994, 153–54) encouraged thinking about Oceania in more-expansive terms, explaining how in the precolonial past, “Theirs was a large world in which peoples and cultures moved and mingled, unhindered by boundaries of the kind erected much later by imperial powers. From one island to another they sailed to trade and marry, thereby expanding social networks for greater flows of wealth.” This vision for the region is powerfully expressed in the pan-Pacific movement to revitalize long-distance canoe voyaging in recent decades, including the ability to navigate by the stars and ocean waves (Genz 2018; Low 2013).

Rejection of the apocalyptic vision of sinking islands takes many forms. “We are not drowning, we are fighting!” is the slogan of the Pacific Climate Warriors, an activist network that strategically deploys social media using essentialized imagery (see Steiner 2015), which blockaded a coal terminal with their outrigger canoes in Newcastle, Australia, in 2014 (McNamara and Farbotko 2017; Jolly

2018) and explained their views to participants at international climate change meetings in Bonn, Germany, in 2017.ⁱⁱⁱ The goal of the Pacific Climate Warriors is to shift the “dystopian narrative” about the future of the Pacific by promoting climate change activism (Titifanue et al. 2017, 142–43). Marshall Islands poet Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner powerfully articulated this view in her dramatic reading at the opening ceremony of the United Nations Secretary-General’s Climate Summit in 2014, addressing her young daughter:

Men say that one day

th[e] lagoon will devour you

They say it will gnaw at the shoreline

chew at the roots of your breadfruit trees

gulp down rows of your seawalls

and crunch your island’s shattered bones

they say you . . .

will wander rootless

with only a passport to call home

But, she continues:

no one’s drowning . . .

no one’s moving

no one’s losing their homeland . . .

no one’s gonna become

a climate change refugee . . .

[Because] there are thousands
out on the street
marching with signs
hand in hand
chanting for change NOW.
(Jetnil-Kijiner 2017, 70–72)^{iv}

A CRITIQUE OF “TRAVELING MODELS”

Anthropologists writing about these issues draw on prior discussion of “traveling models” (Behrends, Park, and Rottenburg 2014; Reyna 2007) to study the response of people living in the Pacific to global climate change as both a scientific discourse and a locally observed and experienced phenomenon (De Wit, Pascht, and Haug 2018b; Hoffman 2018; Klepp 2018; see also Bollig 2018; Weisser et al. 2013). The literature on traveling models and comparable processes of translation examines how ideas and practices associated with conflict resolution (Behrends, Park, and Rottenburg 2014), development (Bierschenk 2014; Olivier de Sardan 2018; Reyna 2007), and human rights (Merry 2006) move from the Global North to locations in the Global South. In development contexts, traveling models have been described as “conscious, proactive, planned, institutionally formalized interventions of a social engineering nature and not simply ideas or technologies that circulate in a spontaneous manner or in accordance with the laws of the market” (Olivier de Sardan 2018, 30–31). Such models are “designed, promoted, and funded from the outside” (Olivier de Sardan 2018, 31). Thomas Bierschenk (2014, 77, 82) refers to these models as “traveling blueprints” for action, describing the “full-scale transposition of organizational models developed [in one location] as solutions to specific problems found elsewhere.”

Scholars studying traveling models recognize that they are not “immutable mobiles” (Latour 1987) that retain their features across contexts, but are modified to fit local circumstances. Stephen Reyna (2007) distinguishes between successful transfers that possess “high fidelity” to the original

and contexts in which there is resistance or opposition, resulting in “low fidelity” transfers. The implication is that traveling models are frequently imposed or adopted in contexts in which they clash with local understandings and political dynamics.

The top-down and hierarchical assumptions of the literature on traveling models impede recognition of the inverse process, including how traveling models generate social activity that informs and may ultimately transform the original blueprint or plan. This occurs, for example, in the context of ethnographic research when fieldwork provides new concepts for anthropological theory. Participation in multilateral institutions like the UN also provides a forum for an exchange of ideas that shapes the original models. Knowledge about local events can also influence traveling models; an example of this is the way lessons learned about an Ebola or cholera epidemic transform traveling models for public health intervention. Social movements can also disrupt or transform traveling models. For example, the campaign against the Ok Tedi mine in Papua New Guinea came to influence global discourse about mining, sustainability, and Indigenous rights (Kirsch 2014), in addition to traveling models about corporate social responsibility (Kirsch 2015). The flow of knowledge may not be equal in both directions, but it would be a mistake to overlook the influence of actors from the Global South on models attributed to the Global North.

Building on the literature about traveling models, scholars studying climate change in Oceania call for “reception studies” that examine how the people living in the Pacific interpret scientific models of climate change, criticize them, or provide grounded feedback in the form of empirical data (Crook and Rudiak-Gould 2018, 9; Rudiak-Gould 2011). They also show how local environmental knowledge has become increasingly entangled with scientific models of global climate change. While these scholars emphasize that they “do not want to create the impression that the idea of climate change travels in a unilinear way from North to South, [given] that it is made and remade continuously throughout its journey” (De Wit, Pascht, and Haug 2018a, 14), they nonetheless conclude “that the globally constructed idea of climate change largely travels from the centres of power to the fringes of the world, rather than the other way around” (14). These studies assume that

the flow of ideas that are global in scale is primarily unidirectional from the Global North to the Global South (see Irvine 2016).

But writing in the spirit of the Pacific Climate Warriors, there's another story to tell. This alternative narrative is crucial to understanding why so many people from the Pacific reject images of sinking atolls and predictions of a future in which they will be climate change refugees. During multisited research in the Pacific and at a climate change science and policy institute in Europe, I tracked the flow of ideas between actors and organizations at different locations. I conducted interviews about perceptions of and responses to climate change with people from academia, church groups, civil society, the public sector, and the private sector in the Solomon Islands, Fiji, and the Marshall Islands. I also worked with Climate Analytics in Berlin, an organization that regularly partners with the Association of Small Island States, which has fifteen members from the Pacific. I interviewed scientists about their research, was present for staff meetings during which they discussed their projects and priorities, and attended public events sponsored by the organization. Through this work, I learned of multiple instances in which Pacific Island political leaders and activists proactively engaged with and contributed to the shaping of climate change policy regimes rather than simply respond to traveling models from the Global North.

This research is in dialogue with a growing body of interdisciplinary scholarship that tracks the development of global environmental governance. Corson, Campbell, and MacDonald (2014) observe that these regulatory regimes are “increasingly cultivated through transnational and dynamic networks of public, private, and nonprofit organizations. The state-to-state infrastructure for addressing global environmental issues has expanded dramatically in the last few decades.” The rise of neoliberalism also creates new “opportunities for nonstate actors to take over state functions” in these arenas (22), ranging from conservation organizations to corporations, although some actors have more influence on these processes than others. For example, Ben Orlove et al. (2014) argue that popular attention to particular ecosystems, notably low-lying atolls and polar regions, gives the people living there more influence over global climate change policy discussions than those who reside in vulnerable environments with less visibility, such as the melting glaciers of equatorial mountains in the Andes.

Gruby and Campbell (2013) describe how small Pacific Island states like the Republic of Palau in Micronesia enhance their influence on global environmental governance through “scalar politics” that emphasize regional continuity. Other scholars examine the contributions of Indigenous peoples to these debates (Belfer et al. 2019; Suiseeya and Zanotti 2019). Keeping these dynamics in mind, this article offers examples of how actors from each of the three major regions of the Pacific—Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia—have played active roles as initiators, motivators, and shapers of global climate change policy regimes.

MARSHALLING A PACIFIC RESPONSE TO CLIMATE CHANGE

My first example comes from the Marshall Islands in Micronesia.^v The legacy of US nuclear weapons testing in the Marshall Islands has influenced the country’s response to global climate change policy debates. One of the key leaders of climate change activism in the Marshall Islands was the late Tony de Brum, who, as a nine-year-old boy, witnessed the detonation of the largest US nuclear bomb over Bikini Atoll while on a fishing boat with his grandfather. De Brum later lobbied for the independence of the Republic of the Marshall Islands at the United Nations, helped to establish the Marshall Islands Nuclear Claims Tribunal to compensate the Marshallese for loss and damage to property and persons resulting from nuclear weapons testing, and subsequently became an international spokesperson against nuclear proliferation (Labriola 2019, 170). These experiences contributed to his success as a compelling and influential speaker on behalf of small island states threatened by climate change (Labriola 2019, 170). In contrast to their passive acquiescence to US nuclear weapons testing during the 1940s and 1950s, de Brum and other politicians and environmental activists from the Marshall Islands, including the poet Jetnil-Kijiner, cited above, have been prominent contributors to international debates about climate change.

In 2013, de Brum told climate change delegates at a United Nations meeting in Warsaw, “We must show the world that climate action is not a choice, but essential to our well-being and firmly in our collective interests.” He concluded his presentation by stating, “The clock is ticking. The

temperature is rising. The oceans are swelling. And the body count is growing. As much as we need to signal that we will act tomorrow, action today is what . . . will count the most. It is now or never.”^{vi}

The following year, de Brum told climate change delegates assembled in Lima in the lead-up to the international meeting that resulted in the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement, “Like other atoll nations . . . we have no higher ground; we have nowhere to go.” Scientists tell our people there’s a risk they will have to leave our country in the future, “but they refuse to go. I refuse to go. My president refuses to go. . . . No one in the Marshall Islands will go. We must stay to defend our homeland.” He added: “The English language doesn’t have [the right vocabulary] and doesn’t fully convey the true meaning of the land as our . . . identity. It is [who we are] as individuals [and] as [a] people, and we will never let it go.”^{vii}

Pacific Island states have engaged in climate change activism for many years (Carter 2015; Orlove et al. 2014, 255; Ourbak, Quinquis, and Cristofari 2019). In their advocacy prior to a UN meeting on climate change held in Copenhagen in 2009, delegates from the Pacific Islands held “regular joint press conferences under the banner ‘The Pacific Voice: 1.5 to Stay Alive’” (Ryan 2010, 194; see also Benjamin and Thomas 2016), alluding to the goal of limiting the global temperature increase to 1.5°C above preindustrial levels. They negotiated as members of the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) and received support from the Least Developed Countries Bloc, which shared many of their concerns (Ryan 2010, 194).^{viii} The target of 1.5°C was “based on research commissioned by AOSIS from the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research and on information from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change” (194). The positions adopted by Pacific Island nations required them to break from the policies of the two largest and most powerful countries in the region, their industrialized neighbors of Australia and New Zealand (197), despite their reliance on both countries for economic aid and political support.^{ix} As one observer concluded, “Pacific perspectives on climate change have helped to foster wider appreciation” of the risks posed by global warming (196).

When drafting the Paris Agreement in 2015, the participants had largely agreed to call for an average temperature increase of no greater than 2°C above preindustrial levels, but de Brum and other members of AOSIS lobbied the delegates and succeeded in changing the language of the final document, which commits the signatories to keeping the global temperature rise during the current century to “well below” 2°C, while “pursuing efforts” to limit the average temperature increase to 1.5°C above preindustrial levels (UNFCCC 2015, 3). The 2018 report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change confirmed the foresight of this goal by providing evidence of the dramatic differences in the social and environmental impacts associated with the alternative scenarios (IPCC 2018). Other research conducted by climate change scientists and policymakers confirm that there is still a viable “roadmap” to limit global warming to 1.5°C this century, although the number of “pathways” to reach this goal continues to shrink due to insufficient action (Climate Analytics 2018). Tony de Brum’s contribution to the Paris Agreement may help prevent the apocalyptic vision of Pacific atolls being swallowed up by the ocean from coming to pass.

Achieving this goal will not be an easy task. The initial commitments to reducing fossil-fuel consumption pledged by the signatories to the Paris Agreement were insufficient to achieve its aims. Therefore, a successful outcome is contingent on the willingness of these states to voluntarily reduce their fossil-fuel emissions beyond their original targets. The “Talanoa Dialogues” conducted at annual global climate change meetings, discussed below, are intended to facilitate the process of raising “climate ambitions” by sharing information about successful energy transitions, promoting technology transfer between countries, and enhancing trust among the participants, so that their “nationally determined contributions” continue to ratchet up over the lifetime of the Paris Agreement.

Advocacy by Tony de Brum from the Marshall Islands and his colleagues from the Association of Small Island States helped to establish more-ambitious goals for the Paris Agreement with the potential to limit damage to coral atolls and other low-lying islands. Rather than being passive recipients of traveling models, the politicians, public intellectuals, and activists from the Pacific have had a significant influence on global climate change policy regimes.

TALANOA DIALOGUES AT THE UNITED NATIONS

My second example considers how the Fijian speech genre of *talanoa*, which is ordinarily defined as story-telling or casual speech, came to be adopted as the official framework for international dialogue on nationally determined contributions to the reduction of global greenhouse gas emissions. In 2017, Fiji was chosen to host the twenty-third annual Conference of the Parties to the 1992 UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, or COP 23, and Prime Minister Bainimarama introduced the concept of talanoa as a “new way to drive the implementation of that agreement” (*Fiji Times*, July 27, 2017). He subsequently reported that the “inclusive, participatory and transparent style” of talanoa was “bringing together governments, investors, civil society and ordinary citizens to call for even greater ambition from every nation on earth—ambition we need if we are to spare our planet from the worst effects of our changing climate” (*Fiji Times*, July 27, 2017). Bainimarama noted that after the Talanoa Dialogue was introduced, “We witnessed . . . a shift in perceptions about the value of this process.” “In fact,” he continued, “any cynicism quickly dissipated and participants were surprised by how much it improved the level of engagement and flow of ideas” (*Fiji Times*, July 27, 2017).

At COP 24 in Katowice, Poland, the following year, the UN Secretary-General António Guterres (2018) thanked Fiji for initiating the Talanoa Dialogue. “It is no coincidence they’re the ones who established the process to discuss ambition to meet a 1.5° goal. Small island states know better than any of us the importance of meeting that goal.” In an informal note cowritten by the presidencies of COP 23 and COP 24, the main features of the process were defined as follows. The Talanoa Dialogue should be “constructive, facilitative and solutions oriented” and “not lead to discussions of a confrontational nature in which individual Parties or groups of Parties are singled out” (UNFCCC 2017, 1). This directive refers to the different starting points of developed and developing countries in the race to reduce carbon emission, including the need to respect policies that acknowledge the desire for “catch-up” growth by developing countries.^x Furthermore, the dialogue should be conducted in “the spirit of the Pacific tradition of Talanoa,” which the authors define as a “traditional approach used in Fiji and the Pacific to . . . share stories, building empathy and trust” (1). This process is intended to

aid the participants by “advanc[ing] their knowledge through common understanding,” resulting in “better decision-making for the collective good” (1). The memo explained that “by focusing on the benefits of collective action, this process will . . . move the global climate agenda forward” (1). Finally, the participants were instructed to address three general questions. “Where are we?” refers to the current status of efforts to achieve climate change goals. “Where do we want to go?” refers to the identification and definition of those goals. “How do we get there?” refers to the process of implementing policies to achieve those goals (1).

In Fiji, Tonga, and Samoa, talanoa and its cognates are iconically associated with kava-drinking ceremonies (see Arno 1993; Duranti 1984; Marcus 1991).^{xi} Although formal kava ceremonies are hierarchical with respect to the order of drinking and speaking (Toren 1999), the speech genre of talanoa is not limited to ritual settings. It refers to “an open, interactive style of engagement” (Matt Tomlinson, personal communication, 2018) that is employed in a variety of contexts and across different status positions. Political candidates in Fiji may refer to meetings with their constituents as talanoa (*Fiji Times*, October 24, 2018). Sugar company executives talanoa with sugar cane farmers (*Fiji Times*, October 4, 2018). Talanoa has also been invoked to describe meetings between government officials, teachers, and parents at local schools (*Fiji Times*, February 10, 2018). Following the May 2000 coup in Fiji, a series of talanoa dialogues was sponsored by the University of Hawai’i, which brought together the leaders of the competing political factions (East-West Center 2004; Hassall 2009, 87). In the first three examples, preexisting hierarchy is temporarily collapsed to facilitate dialogue. In the final example, the organizers stressed the value of initiating dialogue between disputing parties without “preconditions or predetermined agendas” (Halapua 2002, 3).

By the time talanoa was proposed as a format for discussing climate change matters, the speech genre had already demonstrated its scalar capacity. Talanoa was described as providing a format for “dialogue in which people listen to each other, respect each other’s perspectives, and seek solutions that will benefit everyone” (Talanoa Space 2018). As the website prepared for the initial Talanoa Dialogue at COP 23 in Bonn concludes, talanoa “is exactly what we need to tackle climate change—one of the greatest challenges of the century” (Talanoa Space 2018).

In one of the twenty-one Talanoa sessions that took place at COP 24 in December 2018, Ralph Regenvanu, the foreign minister from Vanuatu and moderator, explained how “telling stories,” and especially “success stories,” can help other countries achieve their climate change goals (Nui Talanoa Dialogue 2018; for further analysis, see Kirsch, under review). The minister for the environment from Brazil began the discussion by describing how his government had been “undertaking the Talanoa Dialogues . . . with Indigenous peoples, with academia, with civil society, with the public sector and the private sector,” concluding that “local solutions are the basis of our success.” The representative from the European Union spoke about the progress it had made in decarbonizing its economy. He emphasized the importance of legislation in all sectors of the economy with binding targets for reduced emissions and sanctions if the goals were not achieved. He concluded by pointing out that the EU had been able to combine “reduced emissions with economic growth,” addressing. The delegate from Georgia told the story of how an environmental disaster in Tbilisi prompted 20,000 volunteers to clean up the capital city, illustrating its view that collaborative partnerships will help the country achieve its climate change goals.

The moderator from Vanuatu then told a story about how the salinization of groundwater wells and lengthy periods of drought during the extended dry season, both the result of climate change, were causing water shortages on the island where he grew up. But various domestic and international parties worked together to install a solar-powered desalinization plant that provides essential drinking water to the community, illustrating the importance of international collaboration to ameliorate the problems caused by climate change. A representative from the Spanish utility Iberdrola spoke next about the need to change current energy models through greater efficiency and renewable energy production. She described the company’s investment in wind and hydroelectric energy, which demonstrates that “decarbonizing the energy sector by 2050 is possible both technologically and economically.” In addition, she noted the importance of imposing taxes on carbon emissions following the principle of “polluter pays” to send the necessary “price signals to investors and consumers.” She also called for policies to support persons displaced by the new energy economy, policies that are necessary to achieve a “just transition.” Finally, the delegate from the World Wide

Fund for Nature (WWF) described the organization's efforts to promote national talanoa dialogues in countries around the world "as a way to create the condition to have the countries raising their ambition, achieving their target, and defining a new target that could make us able to . . . keep the promise of Paris." The participation of private-sector corporations and civil-society organizations in these dialogues confirms Corson, Campbell, and MacDonald's (2014, 22) argument about the opportunities for nonstate actors to participate alongside states in the spaces of global environmental governance.

Following their presentations, the participants were asked to comment on what they had learned. The speaker from the EU observed that "the point [of the Talanoa Dialogue] is how much these lessons, stories, have raised the importance of partnership and dialogue as a way to build a long-term vision." He concluded, "We are having now, a very good Talanoa Dialogue . . . all over this COP [conference], no?" The representative from WWF then added, "I think it will be very important to maintain this spirit of dialogue within the different countries to prepare these future strategies and help [gain the] support our citizens. Because we will never achieve climate neutrality if there is not the support of the citizens." Invoking the specter of the Yellow Vest protests the previous month, in which French citizens objected to President Macron's green tax on fuel as a means of reducing carbon emissions, he concluded, "Citizens will have to change their behavior. That requires . . . many talanoas in all our countries."

At the end of the Talanoa Dialogue, the rapporteur produced a list of key messages emanating from the group:

One is in terms of governance. We have heard the government in Brazil listening to their communities and integrating their solutions into national policies. And from the EU about how central strong governance framework is central to be effective. In terms of solidarity and partnership, we've heard that partnerships that bring resources together—technology, finance—to assist needs and climate action elsewhere can be transformational.

The rapporteur continued:

Governments need to listen to communities in finding new solutions. Local solutions involve partnership and means, that is, finance and technology. There is a need to increase involvement of nonstate actors at the national level. Much climate action and ambition can be unleashed by nonstate actors. Nonstate actors are now integrated into the international processes, but national processes also need to engage nonstate actors in order to enhance higher ambitions in all sectors of the economy. Climate action is also a business opportunity for many. There are great opportunities, but they also require the right and stable, predictable policy, legal, and tax frameworks. The EU has shown how it is doing this, and Iberdrola indicated how this can benefit business. The “polluter pays” principle demands from business . . . to respect this principle [and] compensate those adversely affected. There needs to be a just transition. Climate finance is required to relevant countries to ensure just transition.

Finally, the rapporteur concluded:

The last point is the need for long-term political will. We heard the great quote from the former president of the COP, [that this process] is not about short-term politics, but long-term political will.

The summary provided by the rapporteur shows how the Talanoa Dialogue provides insight into key issues that need to be addressed to achieve “the promise of [the] Paris [Agreement].”

As the linguistic anthropologist Judith Irvine (2016, 214) argues, scale-making is an ideological project that tends to make exclusive claims about the capacity to frame the way things should be viewed or discussed. This suggests that Fiji’s promotion of the Talanoa Dialogues is more than just a national branding exercise. In contrast, Fiji managed to flip the script of top-down international debates about climate change by establishing a regional speech genre as a central framework for discussing efforts to achieve the goals of the Paris Climate Agreement.

In these interactions, existing hierarchies are collapsed in favor of a process that emphasizes the formation of consensus, a practice that is sometimes referred to as the “Pacific Way” (Crocombe 1976; Mara 1997; Tupouniua, Crocombe, and Slatter 1975). A key feature of this genre of speech is that it does not become more formal, more abstract, or more generalized as the social distance between the participants increases. This is why talanoa retains an identifiable quality as Pacific speech to the participants from the region and why it works as a format for countries with different economic conditions and interests to discuss their commitments to reducing the common threat of global climate change. It also helps to explain how talanoa has been successfully scaled up as a speech genre from kava-drinking ceremonies to discussions in a variety of contexts in Fiji, as well as the basis for reconciliation after the 2000 coup in Fiji. It is why Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama from Fiji introduced the concept of Talanoa Dialogue to the United Nations and how this scale-climbing speech genre has become pivotal to the negotiation of global climate change action, the promise of the Paris Agreement, and the future of the planet. Rather than assume that Pacific Islanders are always on the receiving end of traveling models, we should see Fiji’s institution of the Talanoa Dialogues at UN climate change meetings as a successful ideological project of encompassment that frames international discussion of these important issues.

WISDOM FROM THE SOLOMONS

The final example comes from the Solomon Islands in Melanesia, which serves as a control case in relation to the other accounts presented here, as the country does not have as prominent a role in shaping international debates on global climate change. Nonetheless, what I learned about responses to climate change issues in the Solomons also raises questions about the applicability of the theory of “traveling models” to local interpretations of climate change impacts and the implementation of aid programs intended to support adaptation to changing environmental conditions.

Scholars writing about traveling models are justifiably critical of essentialized representations of local or Indigenous environmental knowledge that fail to acknowledge the influence of climate

science on those perceptions (Rudiak-Gould 2011; see also Hall and Sanders 2015). However, existing scientific tools for tracking climate change lack the resolution required to identify and predict changes at the local level. Consequently, civil servants and NGO workers in Honiara explained in interviews that it is not the results of scientific models that alert Solomon Islanders to changing conditions but rather their own observations and experiences. Whether it is the greater intensity of extreme weather events like seasonal cyclones or the rising impacts of saltwater intrusion, which affects the growth of taro plants, coconut palms, and other cultigens, such changes are readily observable without being filtered through scientific language or models. Nonetheless, historical knowledge of weather patterns, such as prior flood levels, or knowledge of where coconut palms and taro will no longer grow due to salinization are increasingly combined with scientific models in a way that previous efforts to bring science and traditional ecological knowledge together often failed to achieve. Studies of these phenomena need to become *more* attentive to local knowledge because climate change does not result in universal and predictable changes but rather variability in local conditions. This suggests that scholars of climate change should focus less on the reception of traveling models and more on the global uptake of knowledge about local conditions, which has the potential to yield valuable hybrid understandings of the dynamics of climate change (see Jolly 2018; Malsale et al. 2018).

Like other countries in the region, the Solomon Islands has been the recipient of international aid from both public and private sources that is intended to enhance adaptation to the impacts of climate change. Such financial support is expected to overtake other forms of development assistance in the future (Weisser et al. 2013). During an interview with the deputy director of the National Disaster Management Office in Honiara, I learned that the organization works closely with foreign governments and aid organizations. When I asked whether these relationships were still “colonial” in terms of external domination of priorities and control over implementation, he objected vigorously, “No, no, no, we drive the agenda; we don’t allow [international] NGOs to drive the agenda.” Like several of his counterparts in the Solomon Islands government with whom I spoke, he stressed that his

organization “emphasize[s] to [their] partners that their support must be in line with what the government needs.”

Another change in this process from the past is that international projects are increasingly targeted at the local level by working closely with specific communities, which allows donors and communities to develop more-lasting relationships. This also means that projects are being designed from the ground up rather than delivering externally designed solutions to these communities, which several of my interlocuters identified as a recipe for failure. Another lesson from these interactions was the advantage gained by using local technology to enhance adaptation to climate change rather than importing unfamiliar technology, a practice with a poor success rate. One such initiative involves the restoration of mangrove forests that protect the coastline from cyclones and other storms, absorbing their destructive energy and preventing erosion. Other desired examples include identification of salt-resistant varieties of local cultivars and sharing technology to plant gardens in raised beds, both of which have been proposed as potential adaptations to increasing salinization. A final lesson from these interactions was that such programming should be intersectional—that is, it should help improve social conditions more generally, especially gender equity (see USAID 2016, 2017). For example, a fisheries expert working for the international organization WorldFish in Honiara described how coastal villages that impose restrictions to prevent overfishing often do so in the areas closest to the village, where women are most likely to fish. She explained that encouraging women to participate in and contribute to marine resource management meetings is essential to ensure gender equity in conservation initiatives. These examples indicate how traveling models of development have been modified by Solomon Islanders to enhance their adaptation to climate change, providing useful feedback on a growing category of development aid.

Despite its lower profile on the international scene compared to some of its neighbors, Solomon Islanders helped to kick-start an important initiative promoted by Tony de Brum prior to his death in 2017. De Brum sought to leverage the fact that the Republic of the Marshall Islands operates the world’s second-largest shipping registry to pressure the International Maritime Organization to reduce the fossil-fuel consumption of its global fleet (Darby 2015). The shipping industry contributes roughly

3 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions (Hawken 2017, 50). As part of this endeavor, the Marshall Islands convened a meeting in 2018 that integrated discussion of cutting-edge shipping technology with traditional canoe and sail designs (Marshall Islands Journal 2018). After de Brum's death, a coalition of Pacific Islanders, including Moses Mose, the Solomon Islands ambassador to the European Union, successfully lobbied the International Maritime Organization to improve the energy efficiency of the global shipping industry (Mose 2017). Their efforts resulted in a "target of 50 percent cuts to greenhouse emissions by 2050" and a commitment to "work toward phasing out carbon dioxide emissions entirely" (Marshall Islands Journal 2018). The initiative also spurred interest in developing a fleet of hybrid ships harnessing wind power to connect the islands in the region.

CONCLUSION

The examples presented here challenge the hierarchical assumptions of theories about "traveling models" by showing how their application downplays or ignores the agency and ability of Pacific Islanders to influence global climate change policy regimes. This includes the way that climate change activists and policymakers represent Pacific Islanders as the "canary in the coal mine" for "future climate-change scenarios" (Klepp 2018, 166). However, politicians and environmental activists in the Pacific object to being the subject of climate change allegories. In contrast to popular images of sinking islands and narratives about environmental refugees, I explain why many Pacific Islanders have stopped worrying about the apocalypse and started fighting climate change.

This article provides examples of the perceptions and responses of people living in the three major regions of the Pacific to global climate change, including their contributions to relevant policy debates. Tony de Brum, from the Marshall Islands, and other members of the Alliance of Small Island States successfully lobbied the international climate change community to ensure that the signatories to the Paris Agreement are committed to keeping the global temperature rise during the current century to "well below" 2°C, while "pursuing efforts" to limit the average temperature increase to

1.5°C above preindustrial levels. The importance of this goal was subsequently confirmed by research undertaken by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which showed significant differences in social and environmental impacts between a 1.5° and 2° rise in temperature.

In its role as the host of COP 23, Fiji drew on the scale-climbing Pacific speech genre of talanoa to facilitate dialogue and cooperation between the signatories to the Paris Agreement. Talanoa was chosen as the vehicle for these discussions because of its ability to enhance collaboration and consensus by collapsing hierarchical relationships. The successful institution of Talanoa Dialogues at UN climate change meetings was not just a public-relations exercise, but an ideological project of encompassment, demonstrating the ability of Pacific Islanders to shape these debates. The success of the initiative has led to the adoption of the format of the Talanoa Dialogue in national discussions about climate change in multiple countries around the world.

The examples from the Solomon Islands serve as a control case in this article given the country's comparatively low international profile. Nonetheless, they suggest alternative ways to think about the relationship between local environmental knowledge and scientific models operating on a global scale, which lack the resolution necessary to predict specific impacts. They also provide valuable feedback on traveling models of climate change aid by emphasizing intersectionality, collaboration with local partners, and the implementation of local solutions. Solomon Islanders also helped advance Tony de Brum's efforts to extract commitments from the global shipping industry to reduce its dependency on fossil fuels and pursue decarbonization.

While this article focuses on the actions of Pacific politicians and activists on the global stage, it is worth noting that not everyone in the region supports these initiatives. Despite Bainimarama's success in promoting the Talanoa Dialogues as a way to organize important discussions about climate change, he has his detractors. Some critics observe that he came to power in Fiji after a coup, although he subsequently won the general election for prime minister twice, and suspect that he was more interested, at least initially, in improving the country's international reputation after the military takeover than addressing the problems of climate change. COP 24 was originally designated the

“Pacific COP,” and some people from elsewhere in the Pacific were resentful of how Fiji co-opted the leadership of the COP, sidelining participation by other countries in the region. Some of the people I interviewed expressed criticism of the images on the banners used by Fiji to illustrate its leadership role at the COP, which were apparently the same as those used by the tourist industry, presenting an idyllic view of the country rather than taking its problems and challenges seriously. I was also told by colleagues at the University of the South Pacific in Suva and others working with church-sponsored social welfare organizations that funds expended on overseas travel to meetings in Europe would have been better spent improving their capacity for adaptation to climate change at home.

Although I did not undertake research in rural areas of the Pacific to assess other views on the issues discussed here, there is evidence to suggest that many of the same concerns are on the minds of people living outside of urban areas. Bainimarama, for example, recently observed, “Everywhere I go in Fiji there are only two things people want, especially on the coastline. One is a seawall, the other is a hurricane shelter” (Lyons 2019), illustrating widespread concerns about the impact of climate change on rising tides and the increased intensity of tropical cyclones. But there are also differences in how people in rural and urban areas interpret these phenomena. In Suva, the capital of Fiji, a Methodist minister explained to me that his church offered science-based education on climate change to people living in rural areas, many of whom attribute climate change to “God’s will” (see Cox et al. 2018). In his pioneering ethnography on the subject, Peter Rudiak-Gould (2013, 2014) describes how religious beliefs, including biblical accounts of Noah and the flood, influence the views of people from the Marshall Islands about climate change. In Honiara, the capital of the Solomon Islands, more than one person told me that while it was relatively easy to ignore the effects of climate change while living in the city, people living in rural areas are directly confronted by these changes on a daily basis. This is in keeping with the literature on the “environmentalism of the poor” (Martinez-Alier 2003), which argues that people whose livelihoods depend on their direct access to natural resources often have strong views on the need for environmental protection.

Opinions about climate change did not seem to map neatly onto class or economic difference. During an interview with a master mariner and former head of the Environmental Protection Agency

in Majuro, the capital of the Marshall Islands, he acknowledged, “Some people say, let’s go to Arkansas, Iowa, the States,” but he values the “freedom of staying in your own place” (see Kirsch 2001, 174). He also told me that he “would rather stay here and float and [ultimately] die in my boat” than move away permanently. I heard similar comments from a taxi driver in Majuro who had recently returned from visiting his children and grandchildren in Arkansas. He told me that living abroad may be fine for younger people, but he had no desire to leave the Marshall Islands permanently. I also encountered individuals whose views were in flux, including a committed environmentalist from the Marshall Islands in his late twenties. While he wanted to believe that the initiatives undertaken by political leaders from the Pacific would succeed in stemming climate change and sea-level rise, he nonetheless wondered whether the people of the Marshall Islands would be better off planning for an inevitable future elsewhere. It is not surprising that this double bind would lead people to harbor conflicting views, as the uncertainties about these issues remain as great as their stakes.

This article also presents ethnographic insight into the operation of global climate change policy regimes and science-based reporting on climate change. Scientific research indicates that there are still viable pathways to achieve the goal of limiting the average global temperature increase to 1.5°C, although as Tony de Brum noted, “The clock is ticking.” Similarly, carbon pessimism about the world’s continued dependence on coal, as recently expressed by Thomas Eriksen (2016, 37–41) in *Overheating*, is quickly becoming outdated, as indicated by recent reports documenting a 75 percent decline in investments in new coal plants (Fickling 2019). There is abundant evidence that renewable energy prices have crossed an important threshold, with solar, wind, and other sources of renewable energy becoming cheaper in the long run than carbon-based energy sources, especially after government and multilateral subsidies of the fossil-fuel industry are eliminated. A small but growing number of countries have already succeeded in shifting their energy economies to more than 50 percent of electricity production from renewable sources, and many more are on track to achieve their nationally determined contributions under the Paris Agreement by 2050. During the 2018 Talanoa Dialogue, the EU reported that it is possible to achieve climate change goals while continuing to

expand economic growth, addressing a major source of anxiety among developing countries. Similarly, several of the participants and the rapporteur emphasized that many corporations in the private sector are actively contributing to the achievement of the goals of the Paris Agreement, which is essential for its success.

The examples analyzed here provide robust evidence that politicians and activists from the Pacific Islands are making significant contributions to the shaping and development of global climate change policy. Writing before climate change was on people's minds in the region, Eveli Hau'ofa (1994, 158–59) emphasized the importance of the Pacific Ocean for the global environment, asserting, “There are no people on earth more suited to be guardians of the world's largest ocean than those for whom it has been home for generations.” Many Pacific Islanders have embraced Hau'ofa's prescient call to protect their oceans and island homes by helping to set the agenda for global climate change policy regimes and facilitating international dialogue on these issues. Fully understanding the operation of “traveling models” of climate change requires taking their contributions into account.

Stuart Kirsch *Department of Anthropology, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48109, USA;*
skirsch@umich.edu

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NOTES

ⁱ The cornerstone of the policy was the promotion of skilled labor migration to New Zealand (Klepp 2018, 159–61).

ⁱⁱ As Epeli Hau'ofa (2008, 76–77) observes, “There is comfort in the knowledge . . . that somewhere in Oceania is a piece of earth to which I belong . . . [I]t is my anchor.”

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://350pacific.org>.

^{iv} https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mc_IgE7TBSY.

^v This section heading is borrowed from Nicolette Goulding (2015).

^{vi} <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zQhiYlyvIwU>.

^{vii} <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1COEO819psQ>.

^{viii} AOSIS and the Marshall Islands receive diplomatic support and strategic advice from Climate Analytics and Independent Diplomat (<https://independentdiplomat.org/project/rmi-climate-change/>).

^{ix} Referring to discussion at a regional meeting on climate change in Tuvalu, the deputy prime minister of Australia dismissively opined that the people of the Pacific “will survive” the effects of climate change because “many of them come here and pick our fruit” (McCormack 2019), a comment that was widely condemned for being racist.

^x When the Talanoa Dialogue was initially introduced, some of the participating countries expressed concern that they would face immediate pressure to increase their original commitments. China’s top climate envoy said, “This should be a dialogue, not a negotiation,” and a delegate from India also criticized the expectation that the interaction would result in higher targets (Jing and Darby 2017).

^{xi} The cognate form in Samoa is *talanoaga* (Duranti 1984). In recent climate change meetings for Pacific Island nations held in Tuvalu, the dialogues were identified as *sautalaga*, which was compared to *talanoa* and translated as “open discussion.”