

Voyaging in the Pacific: Narratives of Climate Vulnerability

by

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Candidate's Declaration

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university. To the best of the author's knowledge, it contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ellora Siva', with a stylized, flowing script.

Ellora Siva

Date: 23 October
2025

Acknowledgements

I am made of the stories I have received. Though I can share my stories, they are never solely mine. They are woven from the voices of those around me, the wisdom of my ancestors, and the trust of those who have chosen to share their stories with me.

A story is never written alone — it takes a village. And it took a village to write this one.

First and foremost, to my supervisor, Edwina — thank you for your constant support and care. You made this process not only enjoyable and calm, but also challenged me in the best way possible. You pushed me to refine my ideas and drafts, helping this story become the best version of itself. Thank you for believing in me, in my idea, and for your endless feedback on my many many many random drafts throughout the year.

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To the Tappoos, Prasads, and Kumars — you gave me a home in another country and made me feel seen, valued, and loved. Thank you for everything.

To my Fijian family, my brothers and sisters in Nataleira — thank you for listening to my stories and sharing yours. I love you endlessly, love from Lewah - your little sister.

To my family, who share their stories with me every day and still listen to my chaotic ones with what I know is loving patience — thank you. To my grandparents, Ammamma, Paarta, and Appamma — my first storytellers — I have learnt everything from you.

And finally, to my parents — my world. You are my library: the place where I learn, return, and rest. You hold my stories safely, and I know I can always come home to you.

Anbudan,

Ellora

Abstract

This thesis examines how climate vulnerability in Pacific nations is narrated within global climate discourse, interrogating the processes through which these narratives reproduce colonial power and constrain agency. Recognising that vulnerability is not an objective reality but a discursive construct, I analyse the ways in which external actors—including colonial powers, international institutions, and global media—frame Pacific communities as fragile, dependent, or in need of saving. These narratives shape perceptions, influence policy, and delimit the ethical and political possibilities available to Pacific peoples.

Employing a narrative-driven discourse analysis, I trace the construction of vulnerability through three acts: its initial framing as inherent fragility, its politicisation as victimhood, and its resolution through prescriptive intervention. Tropes, recurring figurative and symbolic devices, form the building blocks of these narratives, revealing the interplay between knowledge, representation, and power. The study situates these discourses within historical and contemporary colonial and neocolonial structures, highlighting how past and present forms of domination intersect to produce enduring dependencies, epistemic marginalisation, and limited agency.

Central to this inquiry is the recognition of storytelling as a mode of power and resistance. Drawing on Pacific epistemologies, oral traditions, and Indigenous narratives, the thesis foregrounds the epistemic authority embedded in lived experience and cultural knowledge. These stories illuminate alternative understandings of climate vulnerability, emphasising resilience, adaptive capacity, and collective agency that challenge externally imposed narratives of passivity and fragility.

Ultimately, this thesis argues that the construction of vulnerability in Pacific discourse is both a reflection and an instrument of ongoing colonial power, shaping what is considered knowable, legitimate, and actionable. By critically analysing tropes and narratives while centring Indigenous epistemologies, the research contributes to decolonial approaches in climate scholarship, advocating for more nuanced, contextually grounded, and justice-oriented representations of Pacific communities

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1.

Prelude

1.i. Introduction: Currents of Thought

Here, I chart the origins of this thesis and the ideas that have guided it.

*We are people of the sea.
Our stories, our **movements**, our histories are all tied to it; the ocean
carries our memory, our **oppression**, and our hope for **liberation**.*

Albert Went, 1976

This thesis was first inspired by the idea that ‘narratives of ocean voyaging’ in the Pacific are more than stories of movement, they are also metaphors through which oppression and liberation are navigated, connecting lives across land, sea and sky (Hau’ofa, 1993, 2008; Teaiwa, 2001; K. Teaiwa, 2014; Wendt, 1976; Trask, 1993; te Awekotuku, 1991; Sinavaiana-Gabbard, 1997; Jetnīl-Kijiner, 2017; Perez, 2010; Perez, 2013; Taitano, 2013).

The composition of this thesis began with deep engagement with poetry, stories, and essays of Pacific storytellers, such as Tongan Fijian writer Epeli Hau’ofa, whose works provided both the conceptual scaffolding and the ethical orientation for my inquiry.

Through these stories, I encountered the vastness, resilience, and agency of Pacific worlds, alongside the persistent and arduous struggles against oppression. This duality of oppression and liberation runs through every story I hear from the marginalised, seen in the quiet ways external powers enforce conformity, decide whose voices matter, and shape which histories and knowledge are deemed legitimate. Even acts of resistance are braided into the very systems they seek to dismantle, forced to navigate structures that overwrite ancestral ways of knowing and replace them with frameworks that value control over coexistence (Fanon, 1961; Lorde, 1984; Smith, 1999; Simpson, 2017; Thiong’o, 1986; Tuck, 2009; Anzaldúa, 1987; Alfred, 1999; Adichie, 2006; Morrison, 1987; Vuong, 2016).

*Oceania is **vast**, Oceania is **expanding**, Oceania is hospitable and
generous, Oceania is humanity rising from the depths of brine and regions
of fire deeper still, **Oceania is us**.*

Epeli Hau’ofa (1993)

These narratives of voyaging — both literal and metaphorical — illuminate how lives are navigated. Just as the ocean is not merely a site of displacement but also a space of connection and movement, so too is the struggle against oppression a journey toward self-determination. Liberation is

found in the ways Pacific communities navigate beyond imposed boundaries, asserting their sovereignty over land, water, and identity. It is in the refusal to be defined solely by external crises but instead by strength, adaptability, and the deep knowledge embedded in cultural traditions.

And so, my second impetus in forming this thesis emerged from the question: if the ocean is vast, and if the ocean is us (Hau'ofa, 1993) — the peoples of the Pacific — why are Pacific bodies and worlds so frequently objectified, exoticised, appropriated, rendered disposable, marginalised, and disempowered within global discourses?

In my university studies of climate science and Pacific studies, the Pacific is rarely represented as vast or expansive, as Hau'ofa so powerfully celebrates it to be, instead, routinely depicted as small, fragile, and perpetually “developing.” I was not taught the works of Pacific storytellers, nor was I taught by them, and perhaps this absence signals a pedagogical lacuna. But I contend it also gestures toward a deeper structural tempest within climate discourse: an insidious epistemic bias that casts Pacific worlds predominantly in stories of limitation, drowning them within narratives of vulnerability and erasing the currents of their agency, resilience, and enduring vitality.

*The study of blackness in American literature is not a study of black people but a study of the ways in which white people have **constructed** blackness.*

Toni Morrison (1992)

In turn, my third thesis compass leads me back to Morrison (1992), one of my foremost decolonial interlocutors, whose work compels a critical interrogation of the discursive frameworks through which knowledge and identity are produced, and further, scrutiny of whose voices are legitimised, whose narratives are rendered invisible, and how dominant discourses shape and circumscribe the stories of those they purport to represent.

More than studying the subject itself, her work insists upon examining the epistemic processes, assumptions, and power relations that have historically constructed the subject in particular ways. To study a people or a place without interrogating the frameworks through which it has been represented is to reproduce the very structures that marginalise and define them from the outside (Thiong'o, 1986; Spivak, 1988; Smith, 1999).

1.ii. Research Question

Building on this insight, this thesis formally asks:

How is climate vulnerability of Pacific nations narrated in climate discourses, and what do these constructions and their underlying processes reveal about the persistence of colonial power?

By examining not only the representations of vulnerability but also the discursive processes that produce and circulate these narratives, I aim to uncover the ways in which colonial structures and systems endure and shape perceptions of the Pacific, its peoples, their agency, at most of all, their stories in global climate discourse.

1.iii. Thesis Outline

The **Prelude** sets the stage for the thesis, introducing the central ideas, research question, and contextual grounding. It begins with **Introduction: Currents of Thoughts**, where I situate the thesis within broader debates on Pacific vulnerability and climate discourse. The **Research Question** explicitly defines the focus of the study, followed by **Navigating the Question**, which explains how I approach the question and why it is significant. **The Power in Pacific Storytelling** emphasises the importance of Indigenous narratives and knowledge systems in shaping alternative understandings of our world. In **My Authorship and Positionality**, I reflect on my perspective and potential biases as a researcher. The **Narrative Approach** outlines how I use thematic and discourse-driven storytelling as a method, while **Pacific Colonial Context** provides historical and political background, illustrating how colonial legacies have shaped contemporary vulnerability and power relations in the region.

The **Toolbox** details the theoretical and methodological instruments guiding the research. **Framework: Representation, Power and Colonialism** introduces the postcolonial and neocolonial lens through the vulnerability narrative is examined, highlighting the representational intersections of knowledge, authority, and control. **Method: Discourse Analysis** explains how I examine narratives to uncover the ways they construct, naturalise, and politicise vulnerability, using the technique of identifying recurring discursive tropes and tracing their influence on perceptions of the Pacific.

Act I examines how the narrative of vulnerability is initially constructed, portraying the Pacific as inherently fragile due to its geographical characteristics. Vulnerability is framed as natural, and precarity as inevitable, establishing perceptions of the region as defined by exposure and susceptibility to environmental risks. **Act II** traces how vulnerability is transformed into a political identity, and how narratives of fragility are mobilised by different actors. It considers how the Pacific is positioned as a victim and how this framing intersects with questions of agency, responsibility, and representation in global discourses. **Act III** addresses how the vulnerability narrative is linked to external interventions or solutions. It highlights the trope of the Pacific needing saving and explores the dynamics of prescriptive responses to perceived vulnerabilities, serving as the narrative's resolution.

The **Epilogue** offers a reflective closure, presenting both personal and scholarly insights from the research while suggesting directions for further study and advancing the thesis' critique of enduring colonial structures.

The **Conclusion** synthesises the key arguments, contributions, and insights of the thesis, while the **References** section documents all sources cited throughout.

1.iv. Navigating the Question

The story of the oppressed is often told by the oppressor; their imagination of us shapes our reality and our memory.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986)

At its core, this inquiry asks a simple question: *who writes the story of Pacific vulnerability?*

The authority to narrate is also the authority to define — to construct the boundaries of what is knowable, imaginable, and legitimate (Thiong'o, 1986). In the context of the Pacific, such narrative control determines not only how vulnerability is understood, but also who holds the power to articulate it (Hau'ofa, 1993; Morrison, 1992). Every narrative carries assumptions, values, and political significance, shaping how places and peoples are perceived, acted upon, and governed (Hall, 1997; Said, 1978). Often, the story begins from a point whereby the ending is already written, constructing a predetermined trajectory for understanding (Farbotko & Lazrus, 2012). Hajer (1997) notes that “the power of a story-line comes from its simplicity and its repetition,” while Adichie (2009) warns of the “single story,” in which repeated, simplified narratives reduce complex realities, forecloses multiplicity, and sustains unequal power relations.

The power of the writer lies in defining and shaping perceptions and possibilities. Yet such power extends beyond linguistics (Thiong'o, 1986) — it gestures to the broader colonisation of imagination itself. In this sense, writing and discourse do not merely represent reality; they draw its contours, governing what can be said, known, and envisioned (Thiong'o, 1986; Said, 1978; Spivak, 1988). Within climate discourse, such power determines how the Pacific is imagined — fragile, remote, passive — and in turn, how it is acted upon (Farbotko & Lazrus, 2012; Jasanoff & Kim, 2015; Kelman, 2018). To control the language of vulnerability is, therefore, to control the horizons of possibility.

Thus, writers wield: epistemic power by determining which knowledge is legitimised (Said, 1978; Smith, 1999); representational power by framing how the Pacific is imagined (Jasanoff & Kim, 2015; Hau'ofa, 1994); and performative power by enacting narratives that create identities, moral claims, and obligations (Bhabha, 1994; Hall, 1997; Spivak, 1988). Once written, these narratives do more than describe reality—they prescribe it, influencing policy, resource distribution, and how communities understand themselves.

It is by our use of things, and what we say, think and feel about them—how we represent them—that we give them meaning.

Stuart Hall (1997)

In this thesis, I contend vulnerability is a story – not merely a descriptive term but a discursive construct shaped by external actors—colonial powers, international institutions, and global media—whose storylines structure global perceptions and delimit the scope of political and ethical agency available to Pacific communities (Hall, 1997; Barnett & Campbell, 2010; Kelman, 2018; Fair, 2020). By foregrounding the question of authorship and narrative, the thesis situates climate discourse as a contested space where colonial legacies persist, and where the Pacific negotiate, resist, and rewrite imposed narratives to assert agency, visibility, and sovereignty (Morrison, 1992; Farbotko & Lazrus, 2012; Hau'ofa, 1994).

1.v. The Power in Pacific Storytelling

During my time in the Pacific – namely Fiji, New Caledonia and Vanuatu - I have come to appreciate storytelling as a living practice and a mode of knowledge through which Pacific communities continually make and remake themselves (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999; Archibald, 2008; Simpson, 2014). In village gatherings, family conversations, and community events, stories are shared, adapted, and reclaimed, nurturing intergenerational bonds and weaving together cultural values identity, environmental knowledge, and collective memory (Wilson, 2008; Kovach, 2009; Cruikshank, 1998; Thaman, 2003).

Our stories are our resistance.

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017)

Yet storytelling is not only about cultural continuity; it is also a site of resistance, asserting agency against domination (Simpson, 2017). Samoan storyteller Albert Wendt foregrounds narratives as a vehicle for resisting colonial erasure, enabling Pacific peoples to reclaim histories and identities suppressed under colonial rule. Similarly, Teresia Teaiwa (2001) and Vilsoni Hereniko (2000) situate storytelling as a form of political agency – through performance and narrative reclamation – that disrupts colonial knowledge hierarchies and centre Pacific voices.

Our myths, legends, and oral traditions are not merely stories; they are frameworks through which we know, teach, and live.

Konai Helu Thaman (2003)

Storytelling also provides a basis for epistemic reframing. Epeli Hau'ofa's (1994) well-known reconceptualisation of 'Oceania' challenges colonial portrayals of the Pacific as small, fragile, and remote, instead envisioning it as vast, expansive, and interconnected. Katerina Teaiwa and Cammi Webb-Gannon (2013) build on this by articulating "Oceanic epistemologies," repositioning vulnerability not as weakness but as adaptive strength. Through such narratives, Pacific peoples actively reshape how the region is imagined and understood—turning imposed categories into opportunities for resilience.

Decolonizing the mind through language and storytelling.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986)

Finally, storytelling operates as a decolonial praxis and a means of imagining futures. Walter Mignolo (2011) and Robert Warrior (1995) claim it a decolonial act: asserting sovereignty, refusing silencing, and envisioning alternatives to dominant epistemologies. In contemporary contexts marked by climate precarity and neocolonial pressures, storytelling enables culturally grounded responses, fostering agency, collective decision-making, and

sustainable futures (Johnson et al., 2022; Archibald, 2008; Simpson, 2017). Contemporary poet Selina Tusitala Marsh (2017), alongside Wendt (1999) and Figiel (1996), foregrounds the performative and relational dimensions of oral tradition, showing how storytelling reclaims Pacific narratives from victimising frameworks and project visions of justice and sovereignty.

I am the story I tell.

Sia Figiel (1996)

Taken together, storytelling in the Pacific is therefore neither passive recall nor ornamental tradition; it is a site of power, resistance, and authority. Further, it is a relational and transformative practice that preserves identity, challenges imposed imaginaries, resists silencing, and asserts Pasifika futures grounded in justice, agency, and culture amid climate precarity and colonial legacies (Hau'ofa, 1994; Thaman, 2003; Teaiwa, 2001; Hereniko, 2000; Wendt, 1999; Figiel, 1996; Marsh, 2017).

When communities reclaim their own narratives, the impact reaches far beyond the surface—it inspires change, builds connections, and strengthens the bonds that hold us together.

Kayla Schwalger (2025)

In the Pacific context, storytelling functions as Indigenous science: an epistemic practice through which ecological knowledge, historical memory, and adaptive strategies are observed, interpreted, and transmitted across generations (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2008; Kovach, 2009). As epistemic labour, storytelling contests Western definitions of evidence and assumptions of 'truth', and challenges epistemic and representational governance; foregrounding knowledge as a shared, enacted practice rather than a static body of codified facts.

1.vi. My Authorship and Positionality

I write from outside Pacifica. I do not live the vulnerability I study. I do not seek to tell their story—only to listen and learn.

But I do have a story to tell. I see the liberation and power through storytelling and *feel* the contemporary oppression of colonial structures.

As a Tāmīlian, stories lie at the heart of my tribe’s culture. Amid this, the imprints of colonisation, genocide, cultural erasure, and neocolonialism mark me as a diasporic Tamil Australian. Yet storytelling remains unbroken and untaken—the core of what we carry forward. Through it, we pass down history, keep culture alive, and reclaim what has been taken from us. Traveling the Pacific, I found connection in stories. We exchanged stories—each carrying the weight of history and the strength of survival.

Research is one of the ways in which the powerful have been able to define and control the powerless, to name and to narrate their histories and identities.

Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999)

I carry the privileges of Western education, academic institutions, and systems that have long dictated whose knowledge is legitimised, whose stories are amplified, and whose are silenced. Academia has long treated the Pacific as an object of study, rather than a source of knowledge from which to learn. I acknowledge my own complicity within these structures.

This thesis is not about speaking for Pacific peoples — nor could it ever be. Following others before me, I approach this work with a ‘listening disposition’ (Adger, 2006; Farbotko & Lazrus, 2012): resisting the impulse to impose narratives and instead creating space to learn from the voices, leadership, and knowledge that have always been here.

I see this as one small part of a larger responsibility: to challenge extractive research practices and to centre the perspectives of those most impacted by the systems I critique. In this thesis, I let the voices of Pacific storytellers guide the paths of inquiry.

Situated within a dominant Western-academic institution, I am conscious of the responsibility I carry and the power this platform grants me.

In this thesis, I offer my story as a form of power—a way to illuminate the enduring reach of colonial domination over narratives, and to trace the ways stories themselves navigate, resist, and assert agency within a world still structured by colonial legacies.

The thesis itself is a story, and through its telling, it also claims its power.

1.vii. Narrative Approach

This thesis employs narratives within discourse analysis both as a tool of critique and as a form of evidence.

Here, ‘narrativisation’ refers to the active structuring of research and analysis as a story, which foregrounds temporal, causal, and discursive dynamics in ways that conventional academic presentation often obscures (Bruner, 1991; Labov, 1972; Polkinghorne, 1995; Riessman, 2008; Foucault, 1972).

I chose this approach for three reasons.

Firstly, understanding vulnerability—and the nature of my research question—requires tracing its construction as a complex, multidimensional concept across temporal, causal, and discursive dimensions. Structuring the thesis as a narrative enables me to interweave discourse analysis with storytelling in an emergent, exploratory way: I did not enter this research with a preconstructed narrative, or predetermined tropes and discourses. Rather, I allowed dominant tropes to guide the analysis, moving iteratively from one discourse to another, and from one trope to the next. This process gradually shaped the narrative arc of vulnerability, within which smaller narratives, discourses, and omissions are situated (Weedon, 1997; Riessman, 2008; Somers, 1994). In doing so, the approach both critiques the colonial legacies embedded in narrative construction and foregrounds the epistemic and political power of narrative itself, using storytelling as a form of evidence to support a broader critique of how vulnerability—and agency—is framed for Pacific peoples (Smith, 1999; Sonn et al., 2024). By framing the academic analysis as narrative, the thesis foregrounds the interplay between analytical reasoning and storytelling, allowing the Results and Discussion to unfold in Acts to map the conceptual progression of vulnerability.

Secondly, I acknowledge that this thesis does not primarily centre Pacific voices; nevertheless, by using narratives as a form of evidence, it engages with Pacific epistemologies to recognise and honour the interpretive, epistemic, and political power of storytelling. My thesis operates as a framework for critiquing the narrative structuring of discourse itself. In this way, the thesis does not merely employ narrative as a method but turns narrative structure into the object of critique—examining how meaning, vulnerability, and authority are produced through the very act of narrativisation.

Thirdly, this narrative focused approach also complements the broader discourse analysis framework: allows for a nuanced engagement within the climate discourse while simultaneously drawing on the epistemic strengths of non-Western ways of knowing to inform critical interpretation (Coren & Wang, 2024). In this way, I challenge conventional Western academic approaches to research and evidence, which often prioritise linearity, objectivity, and quantifiable outcomes. I aim to demonstrate that academic analysis is itself a

form of storytelling, and to explore how this form can expand and transform Western approaches to research.

As a writer crafting a thesis in the form of a narrative, I undertake the telling of two dialectically linked stories. The first traces how vulnerability in the Pacific is narrated in the global climate discourse, made visible through the recurrent tropes and hegemonic representations shaped by postcolonial and neocolonial logics. The second offers a meta-critique of this narrating process as a subtle form of modern colonisation, turning representation into a tool of neocolonial power. This dual approach is demonstrated through the identification of recurring tropes and the systematic analysis of the narratives and discourses they produce, revealing how knowledge and power are constructed and circulated. The reflexivity of this approach allows me to address both dimensions of my inquiry: not only *how* vulnerability in the Pacific is narrated, but also the way in which its narration reveals certain truths, obscures others, and perpetuates enduring power dynamics.

1.viii. Pacific Colonial Context

European colonial expansion in the Pacific, spanning from the 16th to the 20th centuries, profoundly reshaped the region's political, economic, and ecological landscapes. As Whyte (2017) notes, colonialism functioned as “a form of domination in which at least one society seeks to exploit some set of benefits believed to be found in the territory of one or more other societies, from farmland to precious minerals to labor.” Between the 1500s and early 1800s, European powers established plantations, missionary outposts, and extractive operations across Oceania, integrating islands into global capitalist markets (Lightfoot et al., 2013; Poray-Wybranowska, 2020). Colonised territories such as Fiji, New Caledonia, and Papua New Guinea became sites for phosphate, bauxite, and sugar extraction, generating wealth for European metropolises while creating long-term structural dependencies (Lal, 1992; Connell, 1997; Colonial Office, 1880; British Parliamentary Papers, 1902).

Unlike settler colonies in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand, much of the Pacific experienced administrative or extractive colonialism, in which European powers exploited existing social hierarchies to control labour and resources without large-scale population displacement. In Fiji, the British imposed indirect rule through chiefly hierarchies and formalised land tenure under the Native Land Trust Board, maintaining the appearance of Indigenous governance while embedding communities into plantation economies (Macnaught, 1982; Scarr, 1984; Native Lands Commission, 1909).

Industrialisation reinforced these patterns of exploitation. From the 19th century to the 1950s, European powers redirected local economies toward raw material exports, monopolised employment, and captured profits from land and resources, systematically integrating Pacific nations into a global economic periphery (Alam, 1994; Bhavnani et al., 2019; Wolfe, 2006). Colonies were simultaneously markets for European manufactured goods, creating a dual dependency that underpinned metropolitan industrialisation while limiting local development (Wallerstein, 1974; Lal, 1992; Colonial Office, 1895).

Colonial interventions also disrupted ecological and subsistence systems. In Fiji, traditional governance and customary law regulated land, resource use, and social relations, embedding ecological knowledge in everyday practice (Clarke & Jupiter, 2010; Vunibola, 1896). British colonial administration undermined these frameworks, introducing monocultural agriculture, invasive species, and formalised property regimes, which alienated communities from ancestral lands and eroded cultural and ecological resilience (Fry, 2019; Connell, 1997; Fiji Government Annual Report, 1912). Missionaries and colonial authorities further imposed Western religions, education, and moral codes, reshaping Indigenous identities and worldviews while legitimising economic extraction (Banivanua-Mar, 2010; London Missionary Society Reports, 1850–1900).

Even after formal independence in the mid-20th century, Pacific nations remain economically dependent due to colonial legacies. Colonial-era dependencies—including monocultural export economies and reliance on foreign aid—leave resource-rich nations like Fiji, Tuvalu, and Kiribati vulnerable to global market volatility and the influence of former colonial powers, multinational corporations, and international financial institutions (Lea, 2000; Fagan & Munck, 2018; Connell, 2006; World Bank, 2015; Bluefield, 2020). Dependency theory, articulated by Prebisch and Singer (1949), highlights how these structural inequalities persist, as these nations continue to export primary commodities while relying on external markets, foreign investment, and aid, perpetuating cycles of economic precarity. Colonial infrastructures of extraction and governance have been repurposed in postcolonial development and climate aid regimes, maintaining asymmetrical power relations and constraining self-determination.

Thus, the contemporary geography, economy, and ecology of the Pacific are inseparable from the causal legacies of colonialism. Colonial interventions produced structural dependency, reshaped governance, and disrupted subsistence systems, embedding the region within global capitalist hierarchies. Understanding these historical processes is essential for analysing present-day economic inequalities, environmental vulnerabilities, and the contested politics of aid, development, and sovereignty in Pacific Island nations.

2.

Toolbox

2.i. Framework: Representation, Power and Colonial Legacies

Something remains, and the postcolonial is in many ways about such unfinished business.

Robert Young (2001)

I have chosen a postcolonial and neocolonial lens centred on representation because the research question examines how climate vulnerability is narrated in the Pacific—an inquiry that is fundamentally about who speaks, whose perspectives are privileged, and how authority is maintained through discourse (Hall, 1997; Bhabha, 1994). Representation highlights how narratives construct meaning, shape identities, and reproduce or contest power. This framework aligns closely with discourse analysis and trope identification, which examine recurring language, metaphors, and narrative patterns. By focusing on representation, these methods reveal both the colonial structures embedded in climate discourses and the spaces for resistance, reclamation, and epistemic sovereignty (Hau'ofa, 1994; Mignolo, 2011).

Representation as Colonial Power: Representation is not a passive mirror of reality but a constitutive practice that produces the very meanings it appears to reflect (Hall, 1997). It shapes not only how the world is seen but also who is authorised to see and speak. As Bhabha (1994) argues, representation is a site of ambivalence and hybridity—a space where colonial domination and resistance unfold simultaneously. Historically, it has operated as a powerful instrument of colonial control. Said's (1978) *Orientalism* demonstrated how Western discourse transformed colonised regions into objects of knowledge, thereby legitimising domination. Fanon (1967) extended this critique, revealing how colonial representation induced internalised inferiority among the colonised. Similarly, Thiong'o (1986) exposed language and narrative as colonial technologies that fostered alienation and the internalisation of colonial norms—processes that continue to structure hierarchies of culture and power long after the end of formal empire.

Representation has two meanings: speaking for, as in politics, and representing, as in art or philosophy. Both are problematic forms of power.

Gayatri Spivak (1988)

Colonial Imaginaries of the Pacific: These dynamics are acutely visible in the Pacific, where Western representations have historically

romanticised and objectified islands through the dual imaginary of paradise and fragility. From the exploration journals of Captain Cook (1768–1779) to nineteenth-century missionary writings (Williams, 1837), islands were framed as idyllic yet perilously innocent spaces, and their peoples as naive, childlike, or in need of salvation (Edmond, 1997; Chappell, 1997; Thomas, 1990). This ambivalent imagery—simultaneously aesthetic and moralising—underpinned colonial interventions justified under the guise of civilisation and protection (de las Casas, 1552; Sepúlveda, 1550; Hau‘ofa, 1993, 1994). These dual tropes naturalised hierarchies of authority and reified the Pacific’s place within global discourse as both beautiful and vulnerable. Far from benign, such imaginaries structure intervention, defining what counts as risk, who is seen as capable of response, and what forms of knowledge are legitimised (Gregory, 1994; Gandhi, 1998; Smith, 1999).

Representation is the production of meaning through language... it is through representation that meaning is produced and circulated. The act of representation is always a political act because it defines the world in particular ways.

Stuart Hall (1997)

The Power of Pre-Representation: At the root of these imaginaries lies what may be termed the ‘power of pre-representation’—the capacity of discourse, classification, and language to shape perception before representation even occurs. Said (1978) and Spivak (1988) reveal how colonial discourse predetermined the field of intelligibility: establishing who could speak, what knowledge was credible, and which subjects were rendered silent. Chakrabarty (2000) shows that Europe’s universalisation of its own history imposed a teleology of progress, positioning regions like the Pacific as perpetually “catching up” or “falling behind.” Similarly, Quijano (2000) explains how categories such as race, dependency, and vulnerability became naturalised as epistemic frameworks that governed how the colonised were understood. These *pre-representational logics* continue to shape contemporary imaginaries of the Pacific, where descriptors such as “small,” “remote,” or “fragile” appear neutral but carry evaluative meaning that structures aid, climate policy, and global perceptions of capacity and legitimacy.

The relation between knowledge and power is such that knowledge is never innocent. The way a culture represents others produces and enforces power over them.

Edward Said (1978)

Knowledge, Science, and Epistemic Authority: Drawing on Said’s (1978) insight, knowledge both shapes and is shaped by systems of power, and as Foucault (1972) extends, functions as a mechanism through which representation is produced and authority legitimised. During European expansion, Western scientific paradigms were institutionalised as universal standards for classifying and governing colonised lands and peoples. Practices

such as mapping, taxonomy, and census-taking were framed as objective, yet operated as technologies of representation that rendered the world visible through a distinctly colonial gaze (Said, 1978). Through these processes, territory, people, and nature were not merely documented but *constructed* as objects of knowledge and control, translating life into legible forms of power. This universalisation of Western epistemologies subordinated Indigenous modes of knowing, re-inscribing colonial hierarchies through claims of scientific neutrality (Smith, 1999; Agrawal, 1995; Scott, 1998). Today, these hierarchies persist as Western institutions act as gatekeepers of global climate knowledge, privileging quantitative and peer-reviewed forms of science while marginalising Pacific epistemologies rooted in relationality, oral transmission, and lived experience (Whyte, 2013; Farbotko, 2010; Nunn, 2009; Johansson-Fua, 2023). Such epistemic dominance perpetuates what Bowman (2023) terms “hierarchical epistemic domination,” wherein control over *representation* equates to control over what is accepted as real, rational, and authoritative. Reclaiming epistemic authority, therefore, becomes not only a decolonial intervention but also a representational act—one that challenges who is authorised to know, to narrate, and to define the world (Hau‘ofa, 1994; Thaman, 2003; Simpson, 2014).

2.ii. Method: Discourse Analysis

Discourse is not simply that which translates struggles or systems of domination, but is the thing for which and by which there is struggle; discourse is the power which is to be seized.

Michel Foucault (1972)

Discourse analysis is grounded in a social constructivist ontology, which posits that social realities are not fixed but are produced and reproduced through language and representation (Powers, 2007; Hajer & Versteeg, 2005). In this context, a **discourse** can be understood as a structured system of knowledge, ideas, and practices that shapes how phenomena are represented, understood, and acted upon (Foucault, 1972; Fairclough, 1992; Xie, 2018). Rather than simply reflecting reality, discourse constitutes it, producing frameworks of meaning that organise perceptions, knowledge, and action (Hajer, 1995; Aunphattanasilp, 2019).

A core aim of discourse analysis is to understand why some discourses gain dominance while others remain marginal (Hajer, 1995; Powers, 2007). Dominant discourses operate through the repetition of assumptions and tropes, which naturalise specific interpretations and legitimise particular power relations (Stonehouse et al., 2015; Riedy, 2020). Discourse analysis attends to both what is said and what is left unsaid, revealing silences and exclusions that sustain hegemonic perspectives (Wardekker et al., 2009; Stonehouse et al., 2015). By exposing these patterns, discourse analysis can illuminate how practices are justified and how authority and legitimacy are discursively constructed (Hajer & Versteeg, 2005; Teo, 2000).

Tropes are the building blocks of discourse. They are recurrent figurative or symbolic devices—such as metaphors, archetypes, or binaries—that structure meaning across texts (Hall, 1997; Spivak, 1988; Said, 1978). In political and environmental contexts, tropes are rarely neutral; they carry ideological significance, shaping perceptions of actors, events, and relationships (Hall, 1997; Hajer, 1995). When these tropes are repeated and stabilised across narratives, they function as **discursive tropes**, underpinning broader systems of meaning and legitimising specific social, cultural, or political frameworks (Spivak, 1988; Dryzek, 2013).

Narratives in the form of a discourse emerge from the aggregation of tropes, organising events, actors, and causal relationships into coherent stories (Roe, 1994; Somers, 1994). Narratives connect symbolic elements into a structure that makes sense of complex phenomena, while discourses represent the overarching frameworks that govern which narratives are possible or credible (Foucault, 1972; Hajer, 1995; Dryzek, 2013). **Storylines** are simplified narratives that condense complex ideas into communicable forms, enabling shared understanding across actors (Hajer, 1995; Hajer & Versteeg, 2005; Whittaker & Mercer, 2004).

Tropes, narratives, storylines, and discourses operate hierarchically: tropes constitute the symbolic vocabulary, narratives structure these symbols into intelligible storylines, and discourses regulate which interpretations are considered legitimate in social and political spaces. Discourse analysis thus reveals embedded power relations, highlights silences and exclusions, and explains why some interpretations of reality gain dominance while others remain marginalised (Hajer, 1995; Powers, 2007; Dryzek, 2013; Aunphattanasilp, 2019).

Data collection and analysis proceeded iteratively through a chronological layering of three stages to construct the narrative arc (Bright & Du Preez, 2023; Angermüller, 2018; Labov & Waletzky, 1967). **Stage I** involved descriptive coding of policy documents, scientific assessments, media articles, and speeches to identify key actors, metaphors, and silences, revealing the initial tropes of vulnerability. **Stage II** expanded the sample and incorporated emergent themes, examining patterns across sources and how framing reflected underlying power hierarchies. **Stage III** synthesised the datasets into systematically characterised patterns, mapping the chronological relationships between tropes, language, and emerging discourses.

Stages I–III were then repeated iteratively, using the last discourse identified in the previous layer to inform the coding and analysis of the next layer. This layering of “story acts” continued until a coherent conclusion to the **broader narrative** under scrutiny was reached. Through this process, I identified three acts, three core tropes, and eight discourses (entailing narratives and storylines).

The results (tropes) are presented in multiple **tables**, each showing different manifestations of a trope with three illustrative examples. The tables synthesised textual evidence—linking key quotes, sources, and analytical notes—to reveal recurring tropes and the discourses they generated.

A key **assumption** of my discourse analysis is that the tropes I identify are not the only possible representations of Pacific vulnerability. Rather, the analysis is structured around the tracing of dominant or initial tropes, which serve as entry points into broader discourses. Each identified trope generates emergent discourses, which in turn reveal subsequent tropes, creating a sequential, layered narrative. This iterative process allows the narrative of Pacific vulnerability to unfold organically, rather than presupposing a fixed or exhaustive set of representations. In other words, I start with one trope—assumed to be dominant—and follow the trajectory it generates, recognising that other tropes and discourses may exist beyond the scope of this analysis.

3.

Act I

Constructing Vulnerability

Much of what the world thinks it knows about us comes from a perspective that sees only our smallness and ignores our connections, our courage, and our achievements.

Epeli Hau'ofa (1993)

Vulnerability pervades climate change discourse, particularly in relation to the Pacific, yet its meaning is seldom interrogated (Weatherill, 2023; Keaka et al., 2025; Mansfield, 2012; Ford et al., 2018; Birkmann, 2022; Miller, 2013; Turesson, 2024; Pearson, 2009; Yang, 2025; Naylor, 2020; Thomas, 2018; Zhai, 2024; Haigh, 2020; Preston, 2016; Olivares-Aguilar, 2022). I address this lacuna by approaching climate vulnerability in the Pacific not as an inherent or self-evident condition, but as a socially and politically constructed category through which colonial power, epistemic frameworks, and historical legacies are reproduced.

This act interrogates the making and depoliticisation of Pacific vulnerability in the climate discourse, tracing how it is produced, codified, and circulated across scientific, policy, and media spheres, while remaining anchored in colonial logics and imaginaries. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) defines vulnerability as “the susceptibility of a system or community to be adversely affected by climate change, determined by its exposure to hazards, its sensitivity to those impacts, and its capacity to adapt to new conditions” (IPCC, 2007). Yet dominant climate discourse frequently frames Pacific vulnerability through tropes of the region’s geography, portraying it as an almost inevitable consequence of place (Discourse 1). While geographic factors influence exposure, such discourses curating geography alone to dictate vulnerability outcomes, obscuring the deeper social, political, and historical forces that shape risk (Discourse 2).

In this sense, vulnerability is not merely observed; it is mediated through lenses controlled by those who dominate the discourse, ultimately informing the identity of the region in climate discourse (Discourse 3). Ultimately, vulnerability is constructed as an inevitable, naturalised outcome (Discourse 4), politically abstracted and geographically determined, serving as the foundation of the Pacific vulnerability narrative.

3.i.

Trope 1: The Pacific is Vulnerable

Table Number	Table Name
Table 1	Geographic descriptors used as evaluative signifiers of vulnerability in climate discourse
Table 2	Geographic descriptors as rationalising tools in climate discourse
Table 3	Neutral physical traits reimagined as liabilities and epistemic signifiers of vulnerability
Table 4	Geographic descriptors as inherent limitations in vulnerability narratives
Table 5	Normative inscription of Pacific geographical characteristics through Western scientific epistemologies
Table 6	Institutionalised Epistemic Geographic Descriptors and Scientific Framings
Table 7	Pacific Critiques of Environmentalised Vulnerability
Table 8	Place-Based Framing of Climate Vulnerability in Policy and Risk Assessments
Table 9	Institutional and Epistemic Framing of Pacific Vulnerability as 'Natural'
Table 10b	Technocratic Solutions to Geographically Determined Risk
Table 10a	Institutional Acknowledgment of Colonial Drivers of Pacific Vulnerability
Table 11	Cases of Shielding Colonial and Industrial Powers from Accountability
Table 12	Historical Construction of Pacific Geography as Peripheral
Table 13	Colonial Construction of Pacific Geography as Peripheral
Table 14	Epistemic Framing of the Pacific as Defined by the Colonial Centre
Table 15	The Pacific's 'Remoteness' as a Colonial Construct
Table 16	Colonial Projections of Backwardness and Underdevelopment in the Pacific
Table 17	Colonial Representations of the Pacific as Remote and Peripheral
Table 18	The Pacific Naturalised as a Zone of Crisis
Table 19	Colonial Lexicons in Tourism Advertising
Table 20	Colonial Lexicons in Media Narratives
Table 21	Colonial Lexicons in Climate Speeches and Policy Discourse
Table 22	The Pacific as the Face of Global Climate Vulnerability
Table 23	Media Representations of Pacific Islands and Islanders as Vulnerable
Table 24	Descriptors Conditioning Pacific Identity and Future
Table 25	International Recognition and the Reinforcement of Pacific Passivity

3.ii.

Discourse 1: Geographically Determined Vulnerability

This first discourse positions geography as determinant of vulnerability: Pacific vulnerability is framed as a direct consequence of ‘islandness’ (Hau‘ofa, 1993, 1994).

*Their calculations are based entirely on the extent of the land they see.
Smallness is a state of mind.*

Epeli Hau‘ofa (1993)

The Pacific has long been represented in global climate and development discourse through enduring geographical characteristics such as smallness, isolation, and remoteness (Hau‘ofa, 1993, 1994; Nunn, 2009; Teaiwa, 2015; Baldacchino, 2006, 2020; Kelman, 2020; Puig-Cabrera & Foronda-Robles, 2019; Pelling & Uitto, 2001; Remling, 2025; Briguglio, 1995; Briguglio et al., 2009; UNFCCC, 2007; UN SDKP, 2023; IPCC AR6, 2023; Bolesta, 2020; Underhill-Sem, 2024; Raj, 2023; Singh, 2021; Lal, 2022; Rasmussen, 2023).

Notably within climate discourse, these seemingly objective properties describing the Pacific islands’ geography are frequently used interchangeably with evaluative descriptors such as bounded, fragile, and vulnerable (see Table 1) (Barnett & Campbell, 2010; Farbotko, 2010; Farbotko & Lazrus, 2012; Hau‘ofa, 1993; Kelman, 2020; Nunn, 2009; DeLoughrey, 2007; Teaiwa, 1994, 2005).

Table 1. *Geographic descriptors used as evaluative signifiers of vulnerability in climate discourse*

Source (primary)	Quote / Key phrase	How it supports the argument
UNEP (2022)	“Due to unique, inherent and extreme vulnerabilities, including small size, remoteness, and relatively narrow resource and export base...”	Institutional framing positions geographic traits as inherent vulnerabilities, reinforcing the narrative of fragility.
World Bank (2016)	“Pacific Island countries face unique development challenges... small populations spread across many islands and vast distances...”	Economic development discourse links geographic isolation to developmental challenges, portraying it as a structural disadvantage.

Pelling & Uitto (2001)	“Small islands are made vulnerable by their small size, insularity and remoteness...”	Academic literature equates physical characteristics with vulnerability, suggesting an intrinsic link between geography and risk.
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Yet this oscillation of representation operates as an interpretive tool: ostensibly neutral geographic traits are rendered as implicit judgments that orient the hermeneutic frameworks through which the vulnerability and adaptive capacity of the Pacific are apprehended (Hall, 1997; Agnew, 1987; Mitchell, 2000; Soja, 1989; Foucault, 1972). Hence, I argue that geographic descriptors surpass mere description and serve to rationalise Pacific vulnerability (Table 2) (Barnett & Waters, 2016; Briguglio, 1995; Hau’ofa, 1993, 1994; Kelman, 2020; Farbotko, 2010; IPCC AR6, 2023; Chand, 2021; Dodds, 2001; Pelling & Uitto, 2001; Lewis, 2009; Baldacchino, 2004; Bishop, 2020; Lazrus, 2012; Walshe & Stancioff, 2018).

Table 2. *Geographic descriptors as rationalising tools in climate discourse*

Source (primary)	Quote / Key phrase	How it supports the argument
SDSN (2023)	“Because of their inherent characteristics (e.g., smallness, remoteness, high exposure to natural hazards and climate change), SIDS are disproportionately exposed to structural vulnerabilities that hinder their development progress.”	Policy analysis treats geographic traits as fundamental causes of vulnerability, naturalising these characteristics as defining features that necessitate targeted development strategies.
IMF (2016)	“The vulnerability represented by their geographic isolation therefore notably differentiates small islands in the Pacific from many of the other small states in the sample.”	Economic analysis underscores geographic isolation as a distinguishing factor, reinforcing its role in perceived vulnerability and rationalising the need for specific policy measures.
UN-OHRLLS (2024)	“Inherent vulnerabilities — including small size, remoteness, climate change impacts, biodiversity loss and narrow resource base — mean that progress for many continues to be hampered.”	Institutional language naturalises geographic traits as structural vulnerabilities, embedding them within development challenges and rationalising the need for international support.

This interpretive unfolding achieves legibility, not arbitrarily, but as an instantiation of a recurring narrative—termed “small island syndrome”

(Briguglio, 1995; Briguglio et al., 2009)—which, as Hau‘ofa (1993) observes, orientates, *and* privileges, externally imposed, narrow perspectives that underpin a broader geographically deterministic discourse: Pacific vulnerability is both explained and defined by its ‘geography’.

Discursively applied: the conflation between description and evaluation catalyses a logic of causal inference such that the Pacific’s physical characteristics come to assume a determinative role in its exposure to climate risks (Foucault, 1972, 1977; Hall, 1997; Said, 1978; Hau‘ofa, 1993, 1994; Kelman, 2020; Pelling & Uitto, 2001). That is, evaluative judgements are not simply used in conjunction with neutral geographic descriptors; rather, they become *ontologised as truth and* codified as inherent markers of the region’s susceptibility: “bounded” signals limitation (Baldacchino, 2006; Kelman, 2020), “fragile” signals susceptibility (Briguglio, 1995; Baldacchino, 2020), and “vulnerable” signals exposure or weakness (IPCC AR6, 2023; Farbotko, 2010; IMF, 2021; Barnett & Waters, 2016; ADB, 2023). In this mode of construal, neutral physical traits are reimagined as liabilities and asserted as epistemic signifiers of vulnerability (Table 3).

Table 3. *Neutral physical traits reimagined as liabilities and epistemic signifiers of vulnerability*

Source (primary)	Quote / Key phrase	How it supports the argument
IPCC AR6 WGII, Ch. 15 (2022)	“Smaller land area, boundedness by oceans, and remoteness limit connectivity and amplify climate change impacts and risks.”	Frames geography as inherently amplifying climate risk; neutral traits are reimagined as liabilities.
UNDESA — World Economic and Social Survey (2010)	“Small size, isolation from markets and limited natural resources increase economic vulnerability.”	Translates neutral geographic descriptors into economic fragility.
IPCC AR6, Summary for Policymakers (2021)	“Small, low-lying islands are highly vulnerable to sea-level rise and extreme events.”	Homogenises SIDS as uniformly fragile, overlooking diversity and agency.

All together: a narrative of vulnerability grounded in geography is established: Pacific geographical characteristics are treated as natural limitations rather than contingent, context-dependent conditions (Table 4). The explanatory framework thus extends into a definition, vulnerability is rendered pre-determined by its geographic, normative and formally enshrined as a geographic inevitability.

Table 4. *Geographic descriptors as inherent limitations in vulnerability narratives*

Source (primary)	Quote / Key phrase	How it supports the argument
UN-OHRLLS (2024)	“Inherent vulnerabilities — including small size, remoteness, climate change impacts, biodiversity loss and narrow resource base — mean that progress for many continues to be hampered.”	Naturalises geographic traits as structural vulnerabilities, framing them as liabilities that hinder progress and require international cooperation.
UNEP (2022)	“Due to unique, inherent and extreme vulnerabilities, including small size, remoteness, and relatively narrow resource and export base...”	Treats geographic characteristics as inherent vulnerabilities, reinforcing the perception of Pacific islands as naturally limited in capacity to adapt.
SDSN (2023)	“Because of their inherent characteristics (e.g., smallness, remoteness, high exposure to natural hazards and climate change), SIDS are disproportionately exposed to structural vulnerabilities that hinder their development progress.”	Naturalises geographic traits as structural vulnerabilities, embedding them within development challenges and rationalising the need for international support.

Such discourse wields authority in two primary ways.

Firstly, epistemically framed: I conceptualise this construction of the Pacific’s vulnerability —the process by which it is first explained and then defined by geography—as a ‘science of smallness’: a mode of knowledge production where ostensibly neutral geographical descriptors are implicitly construed as inherent weaknesses and elevated to the status of scientific fact. The ‘science of smallness’ derives its authority from dominant epistemologies that privilege Western Enlightenment scientific frameworks, presenting its language as ‘objective’ and thus inarguable (Smith, 1999; Nunn, 2009; Mignolo, 2009; Sutherland, 2014; Hickey & Austin, 2011; Hoagland, 1995; Teaiwa, 2015; Gegeo & Watson-Gegeo, 2001; Thaman, 2003; Johansson-Fua, 2023; Uperesa, 2016; Arista, 2010). That is, the Pacific’s geographical characteristics—its size, isolation, and geography—are normatively inscribed according to Western scientific epistemologies (Table 5), which subsequently legitimise these traits as markers of the region’s vulnerability, conferring authority through attribution rather than mere ascription.

Table 5. *Normative inscription of Pacific geographical characteristics through Western scientific epistemologies*

Source	Quote / Key phrase	How it supports the argument
The Guardian (2025)	“Tuvalu, a small Pacific island nation, faces an existential threat from climate change-induced sea level rise, with projections suggesting that much of its capital, Funafuti, could be submerged by 2050 and up to 90% of the land underwater by 2100.”	Frames geographic traits as intrinsic vulnerabilities, embedding them within environmental and political contexts.
Washington Post (2025)	“Fijian villages like Muani are increasingly forced to relocate due to rising sea levels and worsening climate impacts, despite limited government and international aid.”	Positions geographic characteristics as indicators of vulnerability, reinforcing their role in climate change narratives.
Reuters (2024)	“Commonwealth nations agreed that maritime boundaries for atoll nations should remain fixed despite the impacts of climate change, such as rising sea levels causing submergence.”	Frames geographic traits as intrinsic vulnerabilities, embedding them within legal and political contexts.

Secondly, epistemically enacted: these descriptors, underpinned by the ‘science of smallness’ and sanctioned as scientific truths, are institutionalised through global governance frameworks, which further confer the epistemic validity and incontestability of the descriptors (Table 6). For instance, the UN Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform formally characterises Pacific nations as entities defined by “limited size, geographical isolation, susceptibility to natural hazards and external shocks, high exposure of populations and infrastructure, and constrained adaptive capacity” (UN, 2014). The region’s physical characteristics are again further essentialised as liabilities; the Pacific described as “remote, small in land area and population... with a very narrow resource base and fragile land and marine ecosystems” (UN, 2014). Authority is fortified by the institutions whose legitimacy is derived from entrenched hierarchies and enduring colonial logics (Said, 1978; Foucault, 1972, 1977; Smith, 1999; Mbembe, 2001; Chand, 2021; Mahony & Hulme, 2018; Cameron, 2012). Acting as instruments of power, these institutions construct, regulate, and legitimise knowledge, systematically embedding and codifying Western epistemologies into global hierarchies of formal procedures, classifications, and regulatory practices; in effect, perpetuating contemporary forms of colonial domination (Said, 1978; Spivak, 1988; Bhabha, 1994; Chakrabarty, 2000; Grosfoguel, 2011). This is most prominently evidenced through the classification of Pacific nations as Small Island Developing States (SIDS) at the 1992 United Nations Conference on

Environment and Development (UNCED, 1992), universalising their reduction to—and definition by—their geography as accepted and representative labels within climate and development discourses. Consequently, the ostensible neutrality and objectivity of these frameworks cannot be disentangled from the authority of the institutions that enact, repeat and circulate them.

Table 6. *Institutionalised Epistemic Geographic Descriptors and Scientific Framings*

Source (primary)	Quote / Key Phrase	How it Supports the Argument
IPCC AR4, WGII, Ch.16 (2007)	“Small islands have characteristics which make them especially vulnerable to the effects of climate change, sea-level rise, and extreme events (very high confidence).”	Frames vulnerability as inherent, linking small size and geography to unavoidable risk.
Pacific SIDS (UN statements, 2019)	“Pacific SIDS are characterized by geographic isolation with a vast expanse of 30 million square kilometres of the Pacific Ocean, small land area and population sizes and resource constraints.”	Combines multiple descriptors; shows epistemic authority through global governance reporting.
IPCC AR5, WGII, Ch.29 (2014)	“Given the inherent physical characteristics of small islands, the AR5 reconfirms the high level of vulnerability of small islands to multiple stressors, both climate and non-climate (high confidence; robust evidence, high agreement).”	Reinforces narrative of inherent vulnerability, emphasizing physical characteristics.

Taken together, the consolidation of epistemic and institutional authority by colonial powers simultaneously normalises geographically deterministic readings of Pacific vulnerability *and* insulates them from contestation.

3.iii.

Discourse 2: Depoliticisation-through Determinism

The previous discourse furnishing both a conceptual apparatus for defining Pacific vulnerability *and*, as this discourse will discuss, a mechanism for the canonisation of a single, deterministic story (Briguglio, 1995; Barnett & Campbell, 2010; Farbotko, 2010; Hau'ofa, 1993, 1994).

The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009)

Deterministic logic elevates a single story that, in this discourse, as Adichie (2009) warns, privileges Western epistemologies; consolidating *their* narrative authority over the construction of Pacific vulnerability within climate discourse. In doing so, it forecloses alternative narratives that might otherwise emerge (Said, 1978; Hau'ofa, 1993, 1994; Pelling & Uitto, 2001; Massey, 1994; Soja, 1989; Kelman, 2020).

Truth is a seed planted deep. If you want to get it you have to dig.

Katherena Vermette (2018)

Hence, discourse 2 interrogates the performance of a geographical deterministic narrative (Foucault, 1972, 1977; Hall, 1997; Butler, 1990), wherein dominant tropes subsume the structural and historical drivers of vulnerability, effectively depoliticising it.

Predicated on the epistemic assumption of geography's inherent precarity, Discourse 1 reproduces a deterministic logic in which geography is both *cause* and *condition* - narrative and author - of Pacific vulnerability. While these descriptors are presented as neutral observations rooted in 'truth,' they simultaneously enable the authors of knowledge – the colonial powers - to distance themselves from their own causal entanglement with the condition (Butler, 1990; Barnett & Campbell, 2010; Farbotko, 2010; Hau'ofa, 1993; Wynter, 2003; Kelman, 2010).

Therefore, such performance displaces alternative explanations of precarity and forecloses the relational and contingent dimensions through which vulnerability is constituted. Firstly, by attributing Pacific vulnerability to a single story of inherent geographical fragility within small-island environments, rather than interrogating the material production and colonial responsibility of such conditions, truth is deflected: the historical narratives of territorial control, nuclear military testing, resource extraction, and spatial marginalisation that significantly contributed to the region's precarity are

systematically masked (McDonnell, 2019; Roberts & Parks, 2006; Hartnett, 2021). Secondly, as the role of industrialisation and capitalism as drivers of colonial environmental degradation is consequently attenuated and not recognised as forms of climate vulnerability (Table 7) (Nurse et al., 2014; Sultana, 2022; Pfalzgraf, 2021; Barnett, 2001; Farbotko, 2010; Nunn & McNamara, 2019; Teaiwa, 2018; Morrison et al., 2023; Cameron, 2012; Telesford, 2021). Poray-Wybranowska (2020) reminds us that the Anthropocene is not a neutral planetary epoch; it is a contested terrain structured by intersecting hierarchies of power and social, political, and ecological relations.

Table 7. *Pacific Critiques of Environmentalised Vulnerability*

Source (primary)	Quote / Key Phrase	How it Supports the Argument
Pacific Islands Forum Leaders' Declaration on Climate Change (Tuvalu, 2019)	"Our vulnerability is not of our making. It has been imposed by global systems that prioritise profit over people and planet."	Reframes vulnerability as a result of global economic systems, challenging environmental determinism.
Fiji Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama, COP23 Speech (2017)	"We are not drowning; we are fighting... This is not just a fight for survival against nature, but against an economic system that has failed the planet."	Rejects victimhood, positioning vulnerability as a consequence of systemic economic failures.
President Anote Tong of Kiribati, UN Climate Summit (2014)	"We are at the mercy of decisions made in boardrooms far away... not because of our smallness but because of the greed of others."	Critiques external economic drivers of vulnerability, highlighting global inequities.

In practice, climate adaptation plans, risk assessments, and policy frameworks overwhelmingly reproduce a geographically deterministic conception of vulnerability by framing exposure and risk as determined by and inherent to place, seldom as a product of structural and systemic forces (Table 8) (Wellstead et al., 2016; Pandey et al., 2024; Simpson et al., 2021; Begum et al., 2022; Möller et al., 2022). Such practice institutionally and epistemically strips climate vulnerability of any other dimensions. Further, through its institutional elisions, the discourse discursively converts anthropogenically produced environmental degradation into a presumed natural condition (Table 9).

Table 8. *Place-Based Framing of Climate Vulnerability in Policy and Risk Assessments*

Source (primary)	Quote / Key Phrase	How It Supports the Argument
National Climate Change Adaptation Plan (Australia, 2022)	“Vulnerable regions are defined by their exposure to extreme events”	Emphasizes geographic determinism by framing risk as inherent to location rather than shaped by socio-political or economic structures
UNFCCC National Communications – Pacific Islands	“High-risk zones are identified based on geographic and climatic factors”	Illustrates that vulnerability is treated as a property of place, ignoring historical and structural drivers
Fiji Climate Change Policy (2018)	“Communities in coastal and low-lying areas are most at risk”	Reinforces exposure as place-based, sidelining systemic inequalities and anthropogenic causes of vulnerability

Table 9. *Institutional and Epistemic Framing of Pacific Vulnerability as ‘Natural’*

Source (primary)	Quote / Key Phrase	How it Supports the Argument
Moana Jackson (Māori legal scholar), E-Tangata (2018)	“Colonisation made us vulnerable, not the weather. Climate change just exposes what the system built.”	Directly links colonialism to structural vulnerability, emphasising historical context.
Pacific Network on Globalisation (PANG) Statement (2022)	“Pacific peoples are portrayed as environmentally vulnerable, but the real vulnerability lies in our economic dependency and loss of sovereignty through aid and trade regimes.”	Civil society critique highlighting political and economic dimensions of vulnerability.
UNFCCC Pacific Pavilion Event (Glasgow, 2021)	“For too long, the world has measured our vulnerability in sea levels and GDPs, not in the histories of dispossession that made us this way.”	Collective Pacific voice rejecting technocratic and environmental framings of vulnerability.

Accordingly, ‘solutions’ are conceived as technocratic responses to geographic risk, rather than as measures confronting the politically and structurally produced nature of climate vulnerability necessitates systemic transformation (Table 10a) (McDonnell, 2014; McDonnell & Allen, 2017; Filer et al., 2017; Ballard et al., 2020; Baldwin & Boas, 2017; Fleming, Wetts, Paul et al., 2014; Kehler & Birchall, 2021; O’Sullivan et al., 2023; Nixon, 2011;

Makey et al., 2022; Cairns, 2022; O’Lear, 2016; Szöllősi & McIntosh, 2025; Davies, 2022; Folkers, 2021; McDonnell, 2022; Ballard et al., 2020; Roy, 2010). For example, the IPCC AR6’s (2022) relies on labels such as “highly vulnerable” and “disproportionately affected” without consistently unpacking the colonial, geopolitical, or economic processes shaping their exposure and adaptive capacity. These descriptors are politically abstracted, and whether consciously intentional or not, are *not* neutral, but constitute a political act. That is, behind a façade of normalcy is the concealment of colonial legacies and the structural forces—political, economic, social—that tenaciously thread through and sustain the skeleton of climate vulnerability.

Table 10a. *Technocratic Solutions to Geographically Determined Risk*

Source (primary)	Quote / Key Phrase	How It Supports the Argument
UNFCCC – NAP Technical Guidelines (2019)	“Planned adaptation measures focus primarily on addressing biophysical exposure and hazard management.”	Confirms adaptation planning emphasises geography over socio-political vulnerabilities.
IPCC AR6 WGII (2022)	“Climate change adaptation strategies for SIDS emphasise resilience-building through infrastructure and technology.”	Demonstrates technocratic framing prioritising technical solutions.
World Bank (2024)	“Investment in climate-resilient infrastructure remains the primary mechanism to reduce climate risks in Pacific atolls.”	Focus on technical solutions mirrors the deterministic framing of geographic vulnerability.

Vulnerability, then, must be re-conceptualised to account for epistemic hierarchies, economic dependencies, and socio-environmental inequities, produced over centuries of imperial and extractive practices (Harvey, 2003). Rife with the residues and continuities of colonial domination, these forces that conditioned climate precarity continue to organise global asymmetries that disproportionately structure the experiences of climate vulnerability and adaptive capacity within formerly colonised regions like Pacific nations (Kelman, 2010; Kelman & West, 2009; Barnett, 2010; Barnett & Waters, 2016; Farbotko, 2010; Farbotko & Lazrus, 2012; Baldacchino, 2018; Connell, 2015; Nunn, 2024; Spivak, 1988; Wynter, 2003; Massey, 1994; Escobar, 1995; Nurse et al., 2014; Campbell & Warrick, 2014).

Notably, certain global institutions have started to recognise colonialism as a historical driver of climate vulnerability (Table 10b). This recognition marks a significant shift in the necessity of tracing colonial systems and structures in climate discourse and opens avenues for more inclusive, equitable and just climate policies.

Table 10b. *Institutional Acknowledgment of Colonial Drivers of Pacific Vulnerability*

Source (primary)	Key Action / Initiative	How It Supports the Argument
IPCC (2022)	Integrates historical and structural drivers, including colonial legacies, into assessment of climate vulnerability	Shows that scientific assessments are starting to acknowledge colonial histories as shaping Pacific vulnerability
COP30 Civil Society Letter (2025)	Advocates for explicit recognition of colonialism in climate policy	Demonstrates civil society pushing for the inclusion of historical drivers in vulnerability discourse
UNFCCC / NDCs Review (2023)	Highlights historical inequities and colonial histories in evaluating adaptive capacity of Pacific Island countries	Reinforces that international policy frameworks are beginning to consider structural and historical drivers of vulnerability

To return to determinism's performance - its discursive privileging and depoliticisation of vulnerability - I contend this is symptomatic of a broader epistemic pattern in which exclusion is normalised, and marginalisation becomes both naturalised and inevitable within dominant climate imaginaries (Fleming et al., 2014; Wetts, 2020; Paul, 2023; Chukwuemeka, 2025; Song et al., 2015).

Banaba was consumed — physically mined and spiritually dismembered — its people displaced in the name of progress. Such dismemberment is a haunting metaphor for the way Pacific bodies and places are rendered disposable

Katerina Teaiwa (2015)

Observing the trajectory of this discourse, I argue that the phenomenon under scrutiny transcends mere exclusion, nor is it solely obscuration. Rather, it operates with dual intents: a site of nullification, undermining the efficacy and visibility of structural and historical determinants of vulnerability, and as an avenue of negation, actively denying their relevance and role within dominant climate discourse. Together, these processes operate recursively, producing and cementing epistemic voids in discourse.

Such configurations serve to shield colonial and industrial powers from accountability, even as they remain complicit in both the historical creation of geographic precarity and the ongoing drivers of anthropogenic climate change (Table 11) (Wynter, 2003; McDonnell, 2019; Kelman, 2010; Nurse et al., 2014; Pfalzgraf, 2021; Zylinski, 2024; Goffe, 2025; Sultana, 2022; Roberts & Parks, 2006; Hartnett, 2021).

Table 11. *Cases of Shielding Colonial and Industrial Powers from Accountability*

Source (primary)	Quote / Key Phrase	How It Supports the Argument
Carbon Brief (2023)	“Historical responsibility for climate change is radically shifted when colonial rule is taken into account... The French share of historical emissions rises by half, the UK nearly doubles, the Netherlands nearly triples and Portugal more than triples.”	Highlights how acknowledging colonial rule significantly alters the perceived responsibility for climate change, implicating former colonial powers more heavily.
Climate Justice & Historical Accountability (2023)	“The legacies of colonialism underpin the historical root causes of the climate crisis... Despite its global nature, the impacts of climate change are context-dependent, and remain conditional to each country’s development capacities and vulnerabilities to climate threats.”	Emphasises the enduring influence of colonial legacies on current climate vulnerabilities and the inequitable distribution of climate impacts.
Accountability in Climate Change Governance and Caribbean SIDS (2016)	“The governance and development challenges faced by Caribbean SIDS would suggest that accountability is weak in climate change governance and that this may explain the lack of consistency in climate governance efforts.”	Critiques the lack of accountability in climate governance, particularly concerning Caribbean SIDS, and its implications for effective adaptation.

Therefore, I contend the intent to negate intrinsically lies in the broader practice of systematically repudiating the vestiges of colonial domination (Escobar, 1995; Stoler, 2013) – its modalities, loci, and forms – permanently woven into the fabric of global discourses (Chakrabarty, 2009; Wynter, 2003; Spence, 2006; Spivak, 1988; Massey, 1994). Dominant climate nullifies and negates the very colonial structures it ironically enlists and depends upon to construct and sustain its narrative of Pacific vulnerability (Quijano, 2000; Mignolo, 2007; Sultana, 2022). I assert the negation observed constitutes a psychoanalytical manifestation of disavowal (Freud, 1924; Bhabha, 1994; Fanon, 1967); that is, hegemonic systems or subjects, who performatively reject truths upon which they structurally *rely* on to perform, are endowed with narratorial prerogative and dominion to effectuate ‘disappearances’. In dominant global discourse, these disappearances facilitate naturalising inequities and erasing colonial accountability, and in doing so, perpetuate global inequalities and power asymmetries (Vuong, 2019; Spivak, 1988; Parry,

1992; Robison, 2021; Dzingirai et al., 2022; Said, 1978; Massey, 1994; Young, 2001; Hau'ofa, 1993; Kelman, 2018).

*Capitalism and industrialization stir and disrupt the water and sky;
colonialism makes it hard for some vessels to adapt to the disruptions.*

Kyle Powys Whyte (2018)

Taken together, this performance constitutes an act of *slow violence* (Nixon, 2013)—a form of gradual, accumulative harm that deepens existing vulnerabilities and perpetuates the structures of climate coloniality into the future (Whyte, 2018). Within this process, certain lives and ecosystems are rendered disposable and sacrificial (Teaiwa, 2015), fuelled by enduring structural forces—both historical and contemporary (Makey et al., 2022; Szöllősi & McIntosh, 2025; Sultana, 2022; O'Lear, 2016; O'Sullivan, Omukuti & Ryder, 2023m). The slow violence of climate colonialism exposes environmental change as a continuation of colonial dispossession and inequality (Nixon, 2013; Sultana, 2022; Whyte, 2018; Davies, 2022; Folkers, 2021).

Writers must resist being the ventriloquist for other people's voices. To write otherwise is to be complicit in erasure.

Ocean Vuong (2019)

The act of deliberate silencing assumes the veneer of what I previously recognised as only 'discursive privileging' (entailing peripheralising, obscuring, constraining, and delimiting boundaries of narratives) – which, piloted by the narrative and narrator's hegemony, more accurately constitutes a mode of epistemic erasure masquerading as discursive order and legitimacy.

Situated within a deterministic framework, discursive power hides its deliberate structuring of discourse beneath the illusion of neutrality and absence of intent. That is, colonial powers leverage their narratorial authority in pursuit of erasing and silencing 'subaltern' voices, such as those of the Pacific, within dominant climate discourses, yet the deterministic power gives the illusion that Pacific voices were never actively silenced, but merely 'not focused on' (Spivak, 1988; Said, 1978; Weatherill, 2023; Keaka et al., 2025; Mahony & Endfield, 2023; Behlmer, 2020; Roberts & Montoya, 2023; Mollema, 2024; Varshney, 2023). The layered processes culminate in a dominant climate discourse that both reproduces and conceals the persistent legacies of colonial power.

3.iii.

Discourse 3: Pacific Determinism: The Logic and Performance of Imagined Vulnerability

A single story of vulnerability has been constructed and promoted in global narratives about the Pacific.

Nineteenth-century imperialism erected boundaries that led to the contraction of Oceania, transforming a once boundless world into the Pacific Island states and territories we know today...

This is the historical basis of the view that our countries are small, poor, and isolated. It is true only insofar as people are still fenced in and quarantined.

Epeli Hau'ofa (1993)

Although the earlier discourses draw power from established colonial hierarchies, epistemologies, and claims to authority, I argue that their dominance and operational effectiveness are fundamentally rooted in the colonial logics that constructed and sustain them. I therefore extend this analysis to the colonial imagination that underpins both their formation and their endurance within broader narratives of Pacific vulnerability.

Discourse 3 unfolds the logic underlying Discourses 1 and 2 by revealing the imaginative scaffolding that (firstly) enables and (secondly) perpetuates their representations; I term this logic Pacific Determinism.

At its core, Pacific Determinism rests on the assumption that the Pacific's 'essence'—small, isolated, fragile—is pre-determined by colonial imaginaries. Crucially, this determinism is not merely a representational framework but a mechanism through which a social and political reality is produced: discursive norms define what the Pacific 'is' and, by extension, what it can do (Foucault, 1972; Olssen, 2004; Arribas-Ayllon et al., 2020). It produces a reality: it turns a colonial, imagined geography into lived social and political consequence.

Pacific Determinism thus operates as a 'meta-discursive logic' underpinning Discourses 1 and 2. In Discourse 1, the essentialist claims that the Pacific is inherently small, isolated, and fragile are themselves expressions of Pacific Determinism, framing these geographic traits as pre-existing causes of vulnerability. Discourse 2 then performs this deterministic logic by canonising a single story of vulnerability—constraining climate narratives and excluding Pacific voices from authoritative spaces of governance. These essentialist underpinnings cannot be fully recognised without stepping back to

the meta-discourse revealed here, which exposes the doctrine that essence precedes existence (Aristotle, trans. 1984).

Firstly, I trace the colonial constructions of the Pacific, which produced an essentialised vision of the region, with its supposed essence underpinning the epistemic foundations of contemporary vulnerability narratives.

The domination of a people’s language by the languages of the colonising nations was crucial to the domination of the mental universe of the colonised.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (1986)

Geographic representations in discourse such as “isolated” or “remote” cannot be uncritically accepted as neutral descriptors of reality, as their epistemic legitimacy and scientific authority are relational and contingent. That is, the epistemic construction of the region’s ‘geography’ was derived from colonial imaginaries of the Pacific as subordinate to the European colonial centre, with its peripherality contingent on the metropole’s position of authority (Table 12-13). This worldview, in which colonial powers were positioned as central and normative, manifested in the ways the Pacific’s geography was described, invariably defined with reference to the colonial centre (Table 14). The region was deemed “remote” only insofar as it was measured against European centres (Table 15) (Smith, 1999; Hau’ofa, 1994; Teaiwa, 2015; Weatherill, 2023). ‘Isolation’, then, is less a natural condition than a positional construct, produced through colonial processes that reorganised spatial relations, inscribed distance from the metropole as a marker of both deficiency and power, and were reinforced through colonial cartographic practices (Nunn, 2009; Mawyer, 2014; Sutherland, 2014; Grydehøj, Xu & Su, 2024).

Table 12. *Historical Construction of Pacific Geography as Peripheral*

Source (primary / historical)	Quote / Key Phrase	How It Supports the Argument
The Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony Report (1965) (British Colonial Office)	“In addition the Colony encompasses ... three northern Line Islands (commercial and government plantations about 2,000 miles eastwards from the main chain).”	The specification of “2,000 miles eastwards” marks the territory’s positional isolation relative to the main colonial administered chain — reinforcing geographic determinism and distance from the centre.
Phoenix Islands Settlement Scheme Report (1938-39)	“Five hundred miles to the north of Fiji lay the Ellice Islands ... Several hundred miles north of	The distances from Fiji are given to locate the island groups in relation to the colonial administrative centre

	the Ellice Islands are the Gilbert Islands ...”	(Fiji/Suva). This emphasises how their meaning and value are tied to their spatial relation to the metropole rather than their own internal geography.
Colonial Reports – Annual No. 1500: Gilbert & Ellice Islands (1928-29) (British Colonial Office)	The report situates the territory within the broader context of “remote atoll territories” among many “small islands” administered under the Western Pacific High Commission.	Although lacking a verbatim “remote from the centre” phrase, the classification of the territory as part of “small islands” in a large colonial grouping underscores a marginalised spatial positioning and a periphery-role in the imperial system.

Table 13. Colonial Construction of Pacific Geography as Peripheral

Source (secondary)	Quote / Key Phrase	How It Supports the Argument
Smith, B. (1992). <i>Imagining the Pacific: In the Wake of the Cook Voyages</i>	"The Pacific was imagined as a vast, empty space, a 'blank canvas' upon which European explorers projected their own narratives."	Highlights how European explorers conceptualised the Pacific as an empty space to be filled with their own cultural and geographical frameworks.
Said, E. (1978). <i>Orientalism</i>	"The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies."	Discusses how European colonial powers positioned themselves as central, with the Orient (and by extension, the Pacific) as peripheral.
Teaiwa, K. (2015). <i>Consuming Ocean Island: Stories of People and Phosphate from Banaba</i>	"The mining of Banaba was justified by the belief that the island was a barren, uninhabited space, awaiting European exploitation."	Demonstrates how colonial powers viewed Pacific islands as empty spaces for resource extraction, reinforcing their peripheral status.

Table 14. *Epistemic Framing of the Pacific as Defined by the Colonial Centre*

Source (secondary)	Quote / Key Phrase	How It Supports the Argument
Hau'ofa, E. (1994). <i>Our Sea of Islands</i>	"The Pacific is not a 'far sea' but a 'sea of islands' connected by the ocean, challenging the colonial view of isolation."	Reframes the Pacific as interconnected and central, countering colonial narratives of isolation.
Smith, L. T. (1999). <i>Decolonizing Methodologies</i>	"Research has been a tool of colonization, framing Indigenous knowledge as inferior to Western science."	Critiques how Western epistemologies have marginalised Indigenous knowledge systems, positioning them as peripheral.
Weatherill, C. K. (2023). <i>Pasifika Black: Oceania, Anti-Colonialism, and the African World</i>	"The colonial gaze constructed the Pacific as a site of savagery and backwardness, justifying intervention and control."	Examines how colonial perspectives defined the Pacific in opposition to European norms, reinforcing its subordination.

Table 15. *The Pacific's 'Remoteness' as a Colonial Construct*

Source (secondary)	Quote / Key Phrase	How It Supports the Argument
Hau'ofa, E. (1994). <i>Our Sea of Islands</i>	"The term 'remote' implies a distance that is relative to the observer's position, not an inherent quality of the place."	Challenges the notion of 'remoteness' by highlighting its subjective nature based on the observer's perspective.
Teaiwa, K. (2015). <i>Consuming Ocean Island</i>	"Banaba was labelled 'remote' to justify its exploitation, ignoring its centrality to the lives of its people."	Illustrates how labelling a place as 'remote' serves to legitimise its exploitation and marginalisation.
Weatherill, C. K. (2023). <i>Pasifika Black</i>	"The construction of the Pacific as 'remote' was a strategic move to erase its significance and facilitate colonial control."	Analyses how the concept of remoteness was used to diminish the Pacific's importance and justify colonial dominance.

The spatial and epistemic constructions outlined above laid the groundwork for a deeper logic: the Pacific is essentialised a priori, with traits inscribed before the region's realities are recognised or formed. In other words, the discourse produces assumptions about the Pacific's "essence" prior to, and independent of, its lived realities, embedding smallness, fragility, and isolation as seemingly inherent characteristics,

The silence of the islands in European narratives was not their silence, but ours – an invention to fill the gaps of our own knowing.

Greg Denning (1980)

Colonial cartography and ethnography reimagined the Pacific as peripheral, incomplete, and defined by its lack—of progress, modernity, development, and agency—rather than by its histories (Smith, 1999; Hau‘ofa, 1994; Teaiwa, 2015). As Denning (1980) highlights, these representations were shaped as much by what was left unacknowledged as by what was recorded, producing knowledge gaps that were filled by colonial assumptions. In doing so, they enacted Pacific Determinism, transforming lived realities into a geography of absence defined by externally imposed meanings.

Building on these colonial logics of constructing the Pacific’s geography, *and* on the geography of absence produced through selective silences and knowledge gaps, the region’s “essence” was projected onto its social and political capacities, imagined as backward-looking, underdeveloped, and pre-industrial (Table 16). Firstly, I interpret this *modus operandi* of coloniality as orthodox, reflecting a normative set of assumptions that derive meaning from juxtaposition with the European metropole and its position as the hegemonic centre of modernity, progress, and civilisational authority. Secondly, this orthodoxy establishes a discursive regime of ‘truth,’ defining a canonical socio-political identity for the Pacific and circumscribing the capacities deemed available to it (Foucault, 1972).

Table 16. *Colonial Projections of Backwardness and Underdevelopment in the Pacific*

Source (Primary / Historical)	Quote / Key Phrase	How It Supports the Argument
<i>Report by the Resident Commissioner on the British Solomon Islands Protectorate</i> (1920s, British Colonial Office)	“The inhabitants, though primitive and simple in their ways, show promise under proper European guidance.”	Frames Pacific Islanders as socially and intellectually inferior, constructing their development as dependent on European intervention.
<i>The Times</i> (London), 10 May 1893 – Article on “Civilising the Pacific”	“The islands remain largely untouched by progress, their peoples still living in the conditions of a bygone age.”	Reinforces the trope of timelessness and stagnation, projecting underdevelopment as the Pacific’s natural state.
<i>Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony Annual Report</i> (1950)	“Native production remains largely subsistence-based; industrial	Equates economic simplicity with cultural backwardness, defining the region’s identity through

	advancement is minimal.”	deficiency relative to Western modernity.
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Pacific islands have, therefore, long been othered and cast as ‘vulnerable,’ a discursive axiom determinative of prevailing lexicon, discourse, and norms, independent of contemporary climate change discourse (Table 17) (Barnett & Campbell, 2010; Connell, 2016; Tschakert & Dietrich, 2010; Nunn, 2009; McNamara & Gibson, 2009; Fenton & McNamara, 2017; Huffer, 2014).

Table 17. *Colonial Representations of the Pacific as Remote and Peripheral*

Source (Primary / Historical)	Quote / Key Phrase	How It Supports the Argument
<i>Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony Report</i> (British Colonial Office, 1965)	“The Colony encompasses... three northern Line Islands (commercial and government plantations about 2,000 miles eastwards from the main chain).”	Emphasises spatial remoteness as a defining feature, situating islands in relation to distance from administrative centres, reinforcing their peripheral positioning.
<i>Phoenix Islands Settlement Scheme Report</i> (1938–1939)	“Five hundred miles to the north of Fiji lay the Ellice Islands... Several hundred miles north of the Ellice Islands are the Gilbert Islands...”	Defines islands by their distance from colonial centres (e.g., Fiji), highlighting how geographic separation was used to frame them as marginal spaces.
<i>Colonial Reports – Annual No. 1500: Gilbert & Ellice Islands</i> (1928–1929)	“These remote atoll territories... administered under the Western Pacific High Commission.”	Uses “remote” to describe administrative geography, reinforcing perceptions of isolation and dependence within the colonial hierarchy.

Equating geographic position with cultural identity reproduces the very logic Hau‘ofa (1993, 1994) critiqued: colonial reimaginings shrank an interconnected oceanic world into a fragmented one, a framing that persists in climate discourse today.

We are what we imagine. The imagination is at the heart of every culture, and it is through the imagination that we change our reality. If we do not imagine ourselves, we will be imagined by others and condemned to live in their fiction.

Albert Wendt (1976)

Secondly, I examine the performative mechanism of Pacific Determinism. Contemporary climate narratives that adopt these pre-

representations and frameworks uncritically perpetuate colonial logic, discursively assigning vulnerability to the Pacific as natural (Table 18), portraying geography as destiny and history as absent, and treating both place and past as predetermined and inevitable.

Table 18. *The Pacific Naturalised as a Zone of Crisis*

Source (Primary)	Quote / Key Phrase	How It Supports the Argument
World Bank (2014)	“Pacific Island Countries combine high exposure to frequent and damaging natural hazards with low capacity to manage the resulting risks.”	Frames the Pacific as inherently at risk, turning geographic exposure into a predetermined crisis rather than a product of history or politics.
UNDRR (2023)	“The devastating impact of the climate emergency is most visible among the islands of the world, where the Pacific region remains at the forefront of disaster risk exposure.”	Presents the Pacific as a persistent epicentre of crises, reinforcing its representation as a passive and exposed geography.
SPREP – State of Environment Report (2024)	“Pacific islands continue to experience severe impacts from climate events, with communities repeatedly exposed to disasters and loss.”	Frames recurring climate events as endemic to the region, portraying vulnerability as naturalised and cyclical.

I return to the previous discourses, whose logic is predicated upon that lexicon, and argue that their determinism reenacts and legitimises the authority of the colonial imaginary across both epistemic and political spheres.

Terminology defining Pacific vulnerability by geography are neither objective nor neutral; they are relational constructs built upon Western imaginaries that are inherently power-laden, having originally produced and authorised Eurocentric knowledge. These constructs continue to delineate the boundaries of legitimate knowledge and sustain institutional authority over representation, interpretation, and subsequent governance of the region. Through their consecration as scientific knowledge, colonial imaginaries and evaluative judgement, anchored in colonial assumptions, acquire a veneer of objectivity, systematically obscuring colonial authorship and its foundational role as the ongoing architectural backbone of this determinist narrative. As such, within climate discourse, colonial powers exercise monopolistic discursive authority: constructing the narrative of Pacific vulnerability through geographically grounded paradigms, simultaneously reaffirming the discourse’s deterministic normalisation and rendering it epistemically incontestable.

Canonised terminology that defines Pacific vulnerability through its imagined geography, sculpted by a colonial lexicon that preordains the region's capacities and pre-represents its identity, has, in turn, come to define the Pacific as a geographically determined subject, enshrining the 'sovereignty' of the colonial imaginaries that wrought it (Table 19-21).

Table 19. *Colonial Lexicons in Tourism Advertising*

Source (Primary)	Quote / Key Phrase	How It Supports the Argument
<i>Tourism Fiji</i> (2019) – “Where Happiness Finds You”	“A paradise lost to time.”	Evokes timelessness and isolation, drawing on colonial imaginaries of an untouched Eden awaiting discovery.
<i>Cook Islands Tourism</i> (2020) – “Escape to the Edge of the World”	“Far from everything, close to paradise.”	Reinforces distance and peripherality as desirable, naturalising the region's spatial marginality.
<i>Tahiti Tourisme</i> (2018) – “The Islands of Tahiti: Embrace the Mana”	“Unchanged by the modern world.”	Frames cultural stasis as authenticity, replicating colonial fantasies of the Pacific as pre-modern and pure.

Table 20. *Colonial Lexicons in Media Narratives*

Source (Primary)	Quote / Key Phrase	How It Supports the Argument
<i>BBC News</i> (2021) – “Pacific Islanders Watch as the Ocean Takes Their Home”	“Helpless communities await their fate.”	Depicts Pacific peoples as passive recipients of catastrophe, erasing agency and political complexity.
<i>National Geographic</i> (2018) – “Vanishing Islands of the Pacific”	“The ocean slowly reclaims the land and the lives that depend on it.”	Romanticises loss, portraying environmental decline as destiny rather than a product of global inequity.
<i>The New York Times</i> (2022) – “Last Days of a Drowning Paradise”	“The Pacific faces inevitable disappearance.”	Conflates cultural identity with physical submersion, reinforcing fatalistic and deterministic imagery.

Table 21. *Colonial Lexicons in Climate Speeches and Policy Discourse*

Source (Secondary: Speeches)	Quote / Key Phrase	How It Supports the Argument
<i>UN General Assembly Speech</i> – Pacific Island	“We are small, we are isolated, but our	While politically charged, this language reproduces the inherited lexicon of smallness

Forum Representative (2019)	voices must be heard.”	and isolation as essential traits.
<i>COP26 Speech</i> – UK Delegation (2021)	“The world’s most vulnerable nations, scattered across the Pacific Ocean, stand at the frontline of climate change.”	Enshrines vulnerability as geographic destiny, reiterating colonial spatial hierarchies.
<i>IPCC Report</i> (2023) – Small Islands Chapter	“Due to their small size and remoteness, Pacific Islands face existential climate threats.”	Codifies the region’s vulnerability as a function of geography rather than history or global inequality, institutionalising colonial determinism in scientific language.

The Pacific’s identity, inseparable from the vulnerability narrative inscribed upon it, is cast as the quintessential locus of inevitable climate risk (Table 22), its agency ironically curtailed by the very narratives that define it. (Carter, 2023; Oakes, 2019; McNamara et al., 2020; Keaka et al., 2024; Webber, 2014; Dalby, 1997).

Table 22. *The Pacific as the Face of Global Climate Vulnerability*

Source (Primary)	Quote / Key Phrase	How It Supports the Argument
<i>UNFCCC COP26 Speeches</i> (2021)	“Pacific Island nations stand at the frontline, a warning to the world of what is to come.”	Positions the Pacific as a symbolic exemplar of climate risk, making the region a visible marker for global vulnerability.
<i>National Geographic</i> (2018) – “Vanishing Islands of the Pacific”	“The Pacific Islands are slowly disappearing beneath rising seas, their cultures on the brink of extinction.”	Portrays the Pacific as the face of climate change, where environmental and cultural impacts are intertwined for global audiences.
<i>Tourism Fiji Campaign</i> (2019) – “Experience Fiji Before It’s Gone”	“Witness paradise at risk from the rising tides.”	Commercial media turns vulnerability into a visual and experiential emblem, presenting the Pacific as a representation of climate fragility for global audiences.

When we are defined only by our geography, we lose the edge of our humanity, and our histories become flattened beneath the weight of other people's maps.

Teresia Teaiwa (2005)

To further interrogate the performative power of Pacific Determinism, I theorise its meta-performativity. The label of “isolation” functions simultaneously as descriptor and mechanism of exclusion: because the Pacific is imagined as geographically remote, it is rendered politically and epistemically peripheral—excluded from global trade, governance, and climate decision-making. illustrates what Butler (1993) terms the *citationality* of discourse: repetition produces material reality.

Geography thus ceases to merely contextualise vulnerability and instead comes to embody it, such that the Pacific is imagined as vulnerable by nature (Table 23). In this way, the lexicon of Pacific determinism exercises performative power, translating colonial imaginaries into institutionalised exclusions within climate governance. As Latour (1987) reminds us, scientific descriptors operate performatively, co-constructing the very realities they purport to describe. Hence, the reiteration of geographic descriptors – small, isolated, fragile - does not simply describe Pacific conditions but conditions the Pacific, prescribing what it is allowed to be, who may speak on its behalf, and what it is permitted to become (Table 24). This discursive architecture extends beyond representation; Pacific Determinism is the colonial logic that converts imagined geographic essences into lived exclusions; structuring economic, political, and epistemic hierarchies that position Pacific nations as peripheral and dependent.

Table 23. *Media Representations of Pacific Islands and Islanders as Vulnerable*

Source (Primary)	Title / Key Phrase	How It Supports the Argument
<i>Time</i> (2023)	“The Climate Crisis Is Making the Pacific Islands Unlivable”	Frames the Pacific as facing existential climate threats, reinforcing the idea of extreme vulnerability.
<i>National Geographic</i> (2018)	“Vanishing Islands of the Pacific”	Portrays Pacific Islanders as emblematic victims of climate change, tying their identity to environmental loss.
<i>BBC News</i> (2019)	“Pacific Islanders Watch as the Ocean Takes Their Home”	Emphasises passive exposure, portraying Pacific Islanders as powerless in the face of climate impacts.

Table 24. *Descriptors Conditioning Pacific Identity and Future*

Source (Primary)	Descriptor / Quote / Key Phrase	How It Conditions the Pacific
<i>Tourism Fiji Campaign</i> (2019)	“Experience Fiji before it’s gone... a fragile paradise at the edge of the world.”	Frames the Pacific as delicate and transient, prescribing passivity and vulnerability for consumption by global audiences.
<i>National Geographic</i> (2018)	“The Pacific Islands are small, isolated, and slowly disappearing beneath rising seas.”	Reinforces the notion of fragility and isolation as inherent, limiting the perception of agency or resilience.
<i>Time</i> (2023)	“The Pacific Islands are increasingly uninhabitable.”	Projects inevitability and constrains imagination of alternative futures, reinforcing the narrative of fragility.

Recognition by bodies such as the United Nations General Assembly similarly reinscribes the imaginary of uniquely burdened Pacific nations while marginalising their agency, positioning them as passive targets of structural precarity rather than active participants in shaping climate outcomes (Table 25); a conflation stemming from colonial imaginaries.

Table 25. *International Recognition and the Reinforcement of Pacific Passivity*

Source (Primary / Policy / International Body)	Quote / Key Phrase	How It Reinforces Passivity
<i>UN General Assembly Resolution 73/333</i> (2019)	“Pacific Island nations stand at the frontline of climate change, facing existential threats.”	Frames Pacific nations as uniquely burdened and vulnerable, emphasising risk over agency.
<i>UNFCCC SIDS Submission</i> (2020)	“Small island developing states face disproportionate risks and limited capacities to respond.”	Codifies vulnerability as inherent, portraying Pacific nations as dependent on external actors for solutions.
<i>IPCC Special Report on Oceans and Cryosphere</i> (2019)	“The Pacific region is among the most exposed, with communities	Scientific framing reinforces passivity by focusing on exposure and loss rather than

	experiencing irreversible impacts.”	local adaptation and resilience strategies.
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The discourse of fragility, therefore, functions as more than a symbolic construct: it materially legitimises ongoing dependency and exclusion, illustrating how representation itself becomes a mechanism of control. These narratives erase the dense networks of exchange, navigation, and mobility that predated colonial contact and continue to define Pacific life (Hau‘ofa, 1994; Johansson-Fua, 2023; Arista, 2010; Goundar, 2023).

3.iv.

Discourse 4: Extinction Narrative

Taken together, the preceding discourses construct Pacific vulnerability through colonial imaginaries of geography, depoliticising vulnerability, rendering the Pacific passive and seemingly destined for precarity.

These processes coalesce into a discourse of extinction narratives, dialectically normalising and naturalising phenomena that were once political, whilst presenting risk as inevitable rather than a contingent outcome of power and decision-making across discursive and epistemic registers.

The rising seas are often read as the end of the Pacific, yet these apocalyptic visions reinscribe colonial narratives of loss and vanishing natives, casting the region once again as temporally and spatially behind modernity.

Elizabeth DeLoughrey (2007)

This narrative is not merely an abstract characterisation: it materialises Pacific passivity, simultaneously reinforcing the authority of external actors in defining the region's fate. It frames Pacific communities as helpless, powerless, and incapable of shaping their own futures (Barnett, 2010; Barnett & Campbell, 2010; Farbotko & Lazrus, 2012; Kelman, 2018; Petzold & Magnan, 2019).

Discourses of disappearance in the Pacific are less about actual loss and more about disciplining difference — a way to render Pacific lives legible through a Western grammar of crisis.

Kalissa Alexeyeff and Niko Besnier (2014)

The process is entrenched in deterministic performance of Discourse 3 (Alexeyeff & Besnier, 2014); Pacific voices are positioned peripheral in discourse narration; they are spoken for rather than actively listened to, rendering the discourse self-reinforcing and epistemically authoritative, while reasserting Western epistemic dominance (Said, 1978; Spivak, 1988; Bhabha, 1994; Mohanty, 1988; Escobar, 1995; Crate & Nuttall, 2009; Terry, 2005; Barnett, 2010).

Such strands of this theoretical schema are evidence as follows: the repetition across scientific, policy, and media platforms, these vulnerability tropes materialise into extinction narrative (see Table 26-28). Academic texts such as *Sinking Paradise?* (Weatherill, 2022) and *Islands Without a Future? The Disappearing Paradise of the Small Island States* (Vinke, 2025) exemplify how catastrophic language is strategically deployed to capture attention and amplify urgency (Table 29). Yet, drawing on Foucault's (1980) framework of discourse, power, and knowledge, the more this narrative circulates, the more

it normalises vulnerability as inherent. Even studies intending to interrogate the trope paradoxically reinforce it, producing a feedback loop in which repetition and visibility confer legitimacy and authority (Entman, 1993; Zelizer, 1998; Gamson et al., 1992).

Table 26. *Scientific Reinforcement of the Extinction Narrative*

Source (primary)	Quote / Key Phrase	How It Supports the Argument
IPCC AR6 WGII, Ch.15 (2022)	“Small islands face escalating risks that may exceed adaptation limits, leading to loss of habitable land and ecosystem collapse.”	Frames islands as inevitably experiencing catastrophic loss, embedding a “doomed” trajectory.
IPCC AR6 Fact Sheet: Small Islands (2023)	“Above 1.5°C... 70–90% of reef-building corals are projected to be lost, with 99% lost under 2°C or more.”	Uses “lost” to naturalise extinction as a scientific certainty.
IPCC AR5 WGII, Ch.29 (2014)	“Small, low-lying islands are highly vulnerable to sea-level rise and extreme events, risking complete inundation.”	“Inundation” conveys permanent disappearance, reinforcing the deterministic narrative.

Table 27. *Policy Reinforcement of the Extinction Narrative*

Source (primary)	Quote / Key Phrase	How It Supports the Argument
UNFCCC AOSIS Submission (2019)	“Small islands’ very existence is threatened by sea-level rise ... their limited land area and isolation constrain adaptation options.”	“Very existence is threatened” frames islands as doomed; links geography with inevitability.
UNDP Snapshot: SIDS (2023)	SIDS are “extremely vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, facing potential disappearance of communities and ecosystems.”	Uses “disappearance” to naturalise the extinction narrative in policy discourse.
World Bank Report: Turn Down the Heat (2014)	“Pacific atolls face adaptation costs of nearly \$10 billion due to rising seas threatening their survival.”	“Threatening survival” signals materialised risk and frames islands as on the brink of loss.

Table 28. *Media Reinforcement of the Extinction Narrative*

Source (primary)	Quote / Key Phrase	How It Supports the Argument
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BBC News, “Pacific Islands Face Climate Catastrophe” (2022)	“Island nations are on the frontline of climate change, facing inevitable inundation.”	Uses dramatic language to naturalise a sense of irreversible crisis.
The Guardian, “Rising Seas Threaten Pacific States” (2021)	“These tiny islands could disappear completely within decades.”	Frames extinction as unavoidable, creating a deterministic perception of vulnerability.
Al Jazeera, “Climate Change and the Fate of Small Island States” (2020)	“With each passing year, their very survival hangs in the balance.”	Reinforces the inevitability trope, portraying islands as passive victims rather than actors.

Table 29. *Visual Extinction Narratives in Academic Discourse*

Source (primary)	Quote / Key Phrase / Title	How It Supports the Argument
Gordon-Clark, M. (2012)	<i>Paradise Lost? Pacific Island Archives Threatened by Climate Change</i>	Discusses the impact of climate change on cultural heritage preservation in Pacific islands, framing the islands as sites of loss and threatened continuity.
Allen, E. (2018)	<i>Climate Change and Disappearing Island States: Pursuing Remedial Territory</i>	Explores legal and sovereignty implications of disappearing island states, using “disappearing” to evoke inevitable extinction.
McMahon, J. (2016)	<i>Disappearing Pacific Islands and the Case of Climate Refugees</i>	Discusses strategic planning, policy, and international law addressing potential displacement of populations, highlighting islands as vanishing and vulnerable.

I also argue that the extinction narratives often hinge on the paradox within Western imaginaries: islands are simultaneously exalted as pristine paradises *and* ‘mythologised’ disappearing relics of climate change. These glorified portrayals—circulated through multiple mediums (Table 30) - are not neutral; they reproduce a colonial gaze that homogenises the Pacific (Shea, Painter & Osaka, 2020; Fair, 2020; McNamara & Jackson, 2009; Geoforum, 2023; Hingley, 2017; Barnett, 2017; Kelman, 2019) and frames them as a collective playground for outsiders (Edmond, 1997; Chappell, 1995; Barnett & Campbell, 2010; Fair, 2020; Farbotko, 2005; Kataoka, 2025; Mitchell, 2023; Thomas, 1990; Hau’ofa, 1993; Behlmer, 2020), while erasing the histories of extraction, militarisation, and emissions that have driven present-day vulnerabilities (Pratt & Harrison, 2015; Arvin, 2015; Hau’ofa, 1994). A paradoxical narrative of both admiration and inevitable disappearance (Barnett & Campbell, 2010; McDonnell, 2019; Arvin, 2015; Pfalzgraf, 2021). Whether as hegemonically idealised idylls or as passively doomed lands, the

Pacific is ultimately objectified and essentialised. These portrayals capitalise on romanticised geographical imaginaries– white sandy beaches or crystal blue oceans - that sanctify the Pacific’s landscape and presume its delicacy. The terminology used to describe the Pacific in Table 31 is subsequently rearticulated within global climate discourse. Headlines such as ‘Paradise Lost: The Sinking Islands of the Pacific’ (The Guardian, 2022) instrumentalise the discursively and colonially entrenched hagiography of the region, reproducing narratives of geographic fragility and naturalising the perceived inevitability of the Pacific’s fate.

Table 30. *Timeless Extinction and Paradise Tropes*

Source (primary)	Quote / Key Phrase / Title	How It Supports the Argument
Theroux, P. (1992)	<i>The Happy Isles of Oceania:</i> “After an hour of high clouds and blue ocean the green islands shimmered into view. They were in the middle of nowhere: it was another experience of the Pacific being like the night sky, like outer space, and of island hopping in that ocean being something like interplanetary travel.”	Highlights the contrast between blue oceans and lush islands, emphasising allure and remoteness; frames the Pacific as otherworldly and isolated.
Lonely Planet Guidebook (2006)	“Easter Island emanates a magnetic, mysterious vibe” and “Fiji as: ‘a sprawling brew of lush islands surrounded by kaleidoscopic reefs.’”	Tourist-focused descriptions of idyllic landscapes; reinforces exoticisation and perceived fragility of island environments.
Hall, R. (2009)	<i>Reinventing the South Pacific:</i> “The mountains and lagoons were as delicious as ever and far from being swamped with tourists: Indeed, there were barely enough visitors to sustain the region's high-quality resources.”	Portrays timeless appeal of Pacific islands, including beaches and lagoons; frames islands as pristine yet vulnerable to human interference.

Table 31. *Romanticised Vulnerability in Pacific Media Discourse*

Source (primary)	Quote / Key Phrase	How It Supports the Argument
BBC News (2021)	“Vanishing paradises: Pacific islands under threat from rising seas”	Frames the Pacific as idyllic but imperiled, embedding vulnerability in geographic and aesthetic terms.
National Geographic (2020)	“The Pacific’s disappearing islands: a paradise at risk”	Romanticises islands as pristine while emphasising their

		impending loss, naturalising climate risk.
Lonely Planet (2019)	“Fiji’s azure waters and white sands face rising tides”	Highlights the scenic allure to evoke concern, linking beauty with fragility in media discourse.

If this very narrow, deterministic perspective is not questioned and checked, it could contribute importantly to an eventual consignment of groups of human beings to a perpetual state of wardship wherein they and their surrounding lands and seas would be at the mercy of the manipulators of the global economy and “world orders” of one kind or another.

Epeli Hau’ofa (1993)

In final analysis of this the narrative’s trajectory, the Pacific is constructed as a passive recipient of environmental change rather than as an active agent in shaping its own future (Table 32).

Table 32. *The Pacific as Romanticised Passive Recipient in Climate Narratives*

Source (Primary / Media / Cultural Text)	Quote / Key Phrase	How It Supports the Argument
<i>Tourism Fiji</i> Campaign (2019) – “Paradise Under Threat”	“Experience Fiji before it’s gone.”	Commercialises vulnerability, using climate risk as a spectacle for global consumption—turning existential threat into an aestheticised attraction.
<i>BBC News</i> (2021) – “Pacific Islanders Watch as the Ocean Takes Their Home”	“The Pacific people stand helpless as the tides reclaim their land.”	Reinforces a passive narrative where Pacific Islanders are spectators to their own displacement, essentialising vulnerability as part of regional identity.
<i>The New York Times</i> (2022)	“Pacific Island nations confront disappearing coastlines”	Represents islands as passive victims of environmental change, supporting the narrative of inevitable decline.

Vulnerability is framed as an inherent, naturalised, and predetermined condition, such that the region’s identity becomes subsumed within the very discourse that produces it. Materialised, vulnerability is depoliticised, passivity is assigned, and an extinction narrative is constructed. In this way, the Pacific is not merely described as vulnerable; it is made vulnerable through the representational and institutional apparatuses of climate discourse, embedding historical hierarchies and colonial imaginaries into contemporary understandings of the region.

4.

Act II

Politicising Vulnerability

Unless we claim the ownership of the concept of climate change, we will have problem with the discussion of climate change.

Fe'iloakitau Kaho Tevi (2014)

Vulnerability is constructed.

Stripped of its political force, it becomes a language through which the Pacific is written by the Global North: imagined not as a site of resistance or knowledge, but as the embodiment of climate fragility. Yet, Pacific vulnerability is not the Global North's to own; it is lived, experienced, and understood by the Pacific, and so, its story continues (Tevi, 2014).

Discourse is the power which is to be seized.

Michel Foucault (1972)

Act II interrogates how the constructed vulnerability is used and continued in discourse; tracing the discursive evolution from vulnerability to victimhood, and the shifting sites of power embedded within this transformation.

First, it examines the discursive evolution from vulnerability to victimhood (Discourse 5). Second, it considers how Pacific leaders strategically seize and rework this discourse to assert moral authority and visibility, transforming vulnerability into a rhetorical and political resource that evokes empathy and mobilises international support (Discourse 6). In doing so, they engage in what Foucault (1972) describes as the struggle over discourse itself—for discourse is the power which is to be seized. Yet this act of seizing is not without tension: while the victimhood narrative can endow Pacific nations with moral legitimacy and global visibility, it also operates within epistemic and affective regimes largely shaped by Western audiences. Third, the analysis turns to how this narrative is received and rearticulated within Western contexts, where the label of victim carries different connotations and effects (Discourse 7). When articulated by Pacific actors, victimhood functions as a form of strategic essentialism—a means of asserting voice within an unequal communicative order—yet when framed by external audiences, it can reproduce paternalistic hierarchies and humanitarian imaginaries that cast Pacific peoples as passive or dependent, obscuring local knowledge, political agency, and adaptive capacity (Farbotko, 2022; Koro et al., 2023; MacGregor, 2023; McNamara & Jackson, 2019; Campbell, 2015).

To clarify the conceptual foundations of this discussion, it is important to distinguish between vulnerability and victimhood—two terms often used interchangeably in climate discourse yet underpinned by distinct epistemic and moral logics (Chouliaraki, 2021; Mackenzie et al., 2019). Vulnerability denotes a descriptive condition of exposure to harm—an ostensibly neutral analytic category that can be framed in technical, geographic, or social terms without necessarily invoking moral judgment (Mackenzie et al., 2019; White Rose, 2024). Yet this neutrality is itself an artefact of colonial and developmental epistemologies that have naturalised vulnerability as a defining feature of certain regions, particularly the Pacific. In this sense, vulnerability functions as a sociotechnical imaginary (Jasanoff & Kim, 2015): a collectively held vision that codifies what kinds of subjects and spaces are understood as exposed, dependent, or in need of intervention.

Victimhood, by contrast, represents the politicised expression of this condition—a discursive identity that translates structural vulnerability into a moral narrative of suffering and innocence (Christie, 1986; Schwöbel-Patel, 2018; Karamanos, 2018). Within the moral economy of global climate governance (Boltanski, 1999; Chouliaraki, 2006, 2021; Clark, 2024; Zarakol, 2025), victimhood renders vulnerability visible and actionable, yet often through frames that reaffirm asymmetries of power between the witnessing North and the suffering South. While vulnerability describes a state of precarity, victimhood narrativises it—transforming analytic categories into affective hierarchies that mediate empathy, responsibility, and response.

It is important to acknowledge that this narrative and the following trope is grounded in ‘reality’ – Pacific nations are facing the harshest impacts to climate change (IPCC, 2018; UNDP, 2023; Pacific Islands Forum, 2018; World Bank, 2013; Bouwer et al., 2020; Nunn, 2013; McNamara & Westoby, 2011; Connell, 2016; Kelman et al., 2012). For that reason, the analysis that follows does not seek to dispute this truth, but rather, to examine how the narrative is strategically deployed and, at times, weaponised.

4.i.

Trope 2: The Pacific is a Victim

Table Number	Title
Table 39	Headlines Reflecting Lived Vulnerability
Table 40	Lived Experiences Informing Media Coverage
Table 41	Strategic Victimhood – Pacific Leaders Positioning Their Nations as Frontlines of Climate Crisis
Table 42	Pacific Leaders and Activists Evoking Emotions
Table 43	Pacific Activists Framing Climate Responsibility and Moral Imperatives
Table 44	Storytelling and Policy Influence in Pacific Climate Discourse
Table 45	Global Political and Advocacy Responses to Pacific Narratives
Table 46	Northern Moral Responsibility and Media Framing
Table 47	Discursive Construction of Pacific Nations as ‘Victims’ through Doom Imagery
Table 48	Strategic Pacific Climate Action Overshadowed by Victim Tropes
Table 49	Pacific Leaders Critiquing Western Media Fatalism
Table 50	Pacific Actors Resisting Victimisation in Climate Discourse
Table 51	Depoliticisation and Aestheticisation of Pacific Precarity
Table 52	Defensive Northern Reactions to Pacific Appeals
Table 53	Guilt-Focused or Moralised Northern Responses
Table 54	Guilt-Provoked Social and Political Friction
Table 55	Guilt-Focused, Pity-Driven, or Denial-Oriented Responses

4.ii.

Discourse 5: Vulnerability to Victimhood Narrative

Earlier discourses framed Pacific vulnerability in institutional and geographic terms, stripping it of personal context and anonymising the lived realities of those it affects. In contrast, this discourse examines how emotive language and imagery shape vulnerability as a moral stance, dramatising it and reshaping perceptions of the region and its identity.

With vulnerability constructed in Act I, I turn to its narrative trajectory, tracing its movement through discursive and moral terrains in which the victimhood narrative emerges.

A writer is someone who tells their own truths, otherwise it's not their story to tell.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2014)

To begin, I expose that, in writing a story in which the protagonist is *not* the author, there is a tension in the space between authorial observation and lived experience (Morrison, 1992; Roy, 2025; Hogan, 1995; Scott, 2003; Hulme, 1984; Hau'ofa, 2008; Schwalger, 2025; Simpson, 2017; Figiel, 1996; Waithe, 2018; Jemisin, 2019; Vuong, 2019; Adichie, 2014; Vizenor, 2016; Ngũgĩ, 1986; Hau'ofa, 1993; Salem et al., 2017; Kim, 2016; Hoque et al., 2023; Xie et al., 2022).

Language as culture is the collective memory bank of a people's experience in history.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986)

Vulnerability exists both as a constructed imposition and as a personal reality (Table 33), therefore, it inherently carries emotional and moral weight (Sen, 1999; Nixon, 2011; Ingold, 2000; Mackenzie, Rogers & Dodds, 2014; Duffy, 2019; Ahmed, 2004). Hence, I claim: vulnerability possesses an inherent emotional dimension, independent of its construction, which confers upon it a form of autonomous agency.

Table 33. *Personal Accounts of Climate Vulnerability from Pacific Islanders*

Source (primary)	Quote / Key Phrase	How It Supports the Argument
Fijian Villager,	“We’ve tried seawalls and culverts, but the sea keeps coming. Now we’re	Highlights the emotional and cultural challenges of

Muani (2025)	planning to move inland, but it's hard to leave our ancestral land."	displacement due to rising sea levels.
Emau Village, Vanuatu (2022)	"The sea is encroaching on our gardens. We used to grow taro here, but now it's too salty."	Demonstrates the direct impact of sea-level rise on agriculture and food security.
Tuvaluan Fisherman (2025)	"The tuna are moving away. Our catch is smaller, and the money from fishing is less. We're thinking of moving to Australia."	Reflects the economic challenges faced due to changing marine ecosystems and the consideration of migration as an adaptation strategy.

Its narrative reimagines 'smallness', 'fragility', and 'exposure' as emotionalised and moralised visions of loss (Table 33). For instance, the extinction narrative (Discourse 4) imbued geographic descriptors with affective significance and existential urgency through linguistic constructions and catastrophic imagery such as "frontlines of climate change" (UNDP, 2024) or "death sentence" (Solih, 2021) (Table 34). Not only do the descriptions themselves carry emotional weight, but so too do the responses elicited by representations of vulnerability as an existential and inevitable condition, such as "drown our nation" (Sopoaga, 2015) or "our small low-lying islands will be submerged" (Tong, 2008) (Table 35). These discursive tropes, deployed by external commentators and Pacific actors alike, are designed to provoke responses across audiences, positioning geographic features as both empirical markers and morally resonant symbols of loss.

Table 33. *Emotionalised and Moralised Accounts of Pacific Vulnerability*

Source (primary)	Quote / Key Phrase	How It Supports the Argument
Fijian Youth, Lautoka (2023)	"I feel like we are losing our home piece by piece. It's scary, and I don't know what the future holds."	Emotionalises the abstract concept of exposure, turning smallness and fragility into a personal, psychological reality.
Vanuatu Elder, Tanna (2022)	"We can see the shoreline changing every year. It's like our ancestors are disappearing with it."	Moralises environmental change, linking geographical exposure to cultural and spiritual loss.
Tuvaluan Community Leader, Funafuti (2024)	"Every storm feels like it takes a piece of who we are. Our homes, our land, even our traditions are at risk."	Links environmental exposure to emotional and communal loss, moralising the impact of climate change on identity and heritage.

Table 34. *Affective and Catastrophic Language in Climate Discourse on Pacific Islands*

Source (primary)	Quote / Key Phrase	How It Supports the Argument
Solih (2021)	“The difference between 1.5° and 2° is a death sentence for the Maldives”	Intensifies the catastrophic framing, moralising the vulnerability of the islands and reinforcing inevitability of loss.
Pacific Islands Climate Action Network (2024)	“What was passed in Baku is not a deal; it’s a death sentence for millions”	Frames policy outcomes as catastrophic, emphasising moral and existential stakes for Pacific communities.
SPREP (2023)	“It will be our death sentence”	Directly links climate inaction to existential threat, moralising the consequences for island nations.

Table 35. *Emotional and Existential Responses to Representations of Pacific Vulnerability*

Source (primary)	Quote / Key Phrase	How It Supports the Argument
Sopoaga (2015)	“If we don’t act now, climate change will drown our nation”	Frames vulnerability as existential, portraying inaction as catastrophic and inevitable.
Tong (2008)	“Our small low-lying islands will be submerged”	Emphasises inevitability of loss, giving emotional weight to abstract geographic descriptors.
Tongan Government Statement (2010)	“The sea is rising and our lands will be claimed by the ocean”	Reinforces perception of the Pacific as powerless, naturalising vulnerability.

Discursive tropes like “they will drown” (UNDP, 2024) and “they have no escape” (Solih, 2021) play into emotional geographies (Table 36), circulating fear within Pacific communities and conjuring pity, empathy and guilt among Global North audiences (Ryan, 2016; Höijer, 2010; Farbotko, 2010; Morris et al, 2019). These emotions are not adventitious; they are the connective tissue between experience, perception, and identity, mediating the relationship between external narratives and self-understanding. Further, they guide internal and external understandings, representations, and responses to Pacific vulnerability - a trajectory that the next two discourses will interrogate more closely.

Table 36. *Emotional Geographies within Discursive Tropes*

Source (primary)	Quote / Key Phrase	How It Supports the Argument
UNDP Pacific SIDS Report (2024)	“They will drown if global emissions are not reduced”	Frames vulnerability as inevitable, giving geographic exposure an emotional and catastrophic dimension.
Fiji Youth Climate Declaration (2023)	“If the seas rise further, we may lose everything we love”	Emotionalises vulnerability, turning abstract environmental risk into lived psychological experience.
Vanuatu Elder Interview, Tanna (2022)	“We watch our lands vanish and feel powerless to stop it”	Personalises exposure, showing how discursive tropes translate into fear and grief.

As Bagnoli (2020) argues, emotional responses to vulnerability are not merely personal experiences but are shaped by social norms and moral expectations, imbuing these emotions with normative and moral significance.

I call upon studies that investigated and provided evidence that, although Western institutions continue to anchor climate damage in Eurocentric scientific data to fuel climate interventions, it is the affective, narrative-driven rhetoric that captures hearts and spurs action worldwide (Morris et al, 2019; Moezzi et al., 2017; Martinez-Conde et al., 2017; Haven, 2007; Bagozzi et al., 1994; Hoeken et al., 2016; Kahan, 2016; Keltner & Lerner, 2010; Nabi, 2002; Potter & Bolls, 2012; Nelson, 2012; Zak, 2015; Woods & Fisher, 1989; van der Linden et al., 2014; Cronon, 1992; Whitmarsh et al., 2013; Barraza et al., 2015; Dhalstrom, 2014; Meier & Pinker, 1995; Vernooij, 2025; Zaremba et al., 2023; Hickmen et al., 2021). At the crux of such ‘realisation’, this epistemic approach draws upon the affective and relational registers *characteristic* of Pacific and Indigenous storytelling (Vogt et al., 2020; Mortreux & Barnett, 2009; Mayes & Center, 2022; Avia, 2021; Spence et al., 2012; Cottle, 2019; Boykoff, 2011; Chouliaraki, 2020; Haidt, 2003; Lerner et al., 2015; Nussbaum, 2013).

The irony of these findings lies in the fact that Pacific Indigenous communities have long understood the effectiveness of these approaches, yet Western science often demands empirical validation through Eurocentric methods in order to recognise their value (Hulme, 2009; Mortreux & Barnett, 2009; Boykoff, 2011; Cottle, 2019; Mayes & Center, 2022). As ironic as both the need for and the nature of these realisations may be, I contend that this late recognition is still essential for bridging the neocolonial divide inherent in Western frameworks as they continue to gatekeep the validity of evidence in decision-making spaces (Whyte, 2017; Goffe, 2025; Wilkens & Datchoua-Tirvaudey, 2022; Haverkamp, 2024; Wilson & Parsons, 2022; Rodríguez & Alsop, 2024; Indigenous Climate Action, 2024; Arctic Council, 2024; UNDP Climate Promise, 2024; Cameron & Sloan Morgan, 2021; Hernández, 2024; World Bank, 2020; Springer, 2024).

To return to my core argument, and in summation of this discourse trajectory, moral appeals, built on geographical determinism, now orientate the narrative of Pacific vulnerability; universalised as a moral story of loss, helplessness, and inevitability. To contextualise this discourse within a broader schema, societies - guided by sociocultural norms and collective frameworks - designated certain individuals or groups as blameless, weak, and deserving of sympathy, often creating what Christie (1986) calls the ‘ideal victim’. The mediating role of this discourse employs emotional and moral registers to evoke empathy across social and geographical distance, rendering suffering both legible and morally salient to global audiences (Boltanski, 1999; Chouliaraki, 2006, 2013, 2020). Thus, the *story’s* existential and emotive framing consolidates Pacific vulnerability into a compelling ‘victimhood narrative’ (Table 37).

Table 37. *Victimhood and Frontline Narratives in Pacific Climate Discourse*

Source (primary)	Quote / Key Phrase	How It Supports the Argument
UNDP — SIDS Snapshot (2024)	“Small island developing states are on the frontlines of climate change, facing risks far beyond their control.”	Frames Pacific islands as passive victims; establishes geographic exposure as unavoidable.
Sopoaga, T. (2015)	“We feel like our people are victims of a crisis we did not create.”	Personalises the narrative of helplessness; positions Pacific communities as powerless.
UNDP Pacific Office (2024)	“Pacific Islands youth on the frontlines of climate change need the world’s attention”	Frames youth as active agents on the frontlines, highlighting urgency and moral responsibility.

Importantly, as Chouliaraki (2020) and Tevi (2014) contend, victimhood functions as a form of affective communication that imbues moral value on those who claim it. This political identity gains most political force when transformed into a strategic instrument, mobilised to shape discourse and exercise authority. Engle (2010) and Giesen (2010) identify this trajectory as a socially sanctioned and politically legitimate mechanism within decision-making arenas, in which I claim it to politicise the ostensibly ‘unpolitical’ construction of vulnerability established in Act I. Yet, such politicisation operates in a polarised manner: on one hand, it acknowledges the disproportionate impacts of climate change faced by Pacific nations and grants them a form of moral authority with visibility and recognition on the global stage. On the other hand, the term carries connotations of helplessness and dependency, submitting them to one characterisation that the Global North use to maintain epistemic authority.

This polarisation is contingent on focalisation— as will be explored in the following discourses—on who tells the story, and from what vantage point

(Genette, 1980; Bal, 1997; Chatman, 1978; Rimmon-Kenan, 1983; Herman, 2002; Iser, 1978; Waugh, 1984; Ryan, 1991; Bordwell, 1985). That is, when narrated internally, by those who experience vulnerability, the story conveys emotional and embodied realities that assert agency and specificity. When told externally, through the detached gaze of observers or institutions, vulnerability risks abstraction, translated into statistics or spectacle. Thus, the same narrative of victimhood can either empower or diminish the Pacific’s voice in global discourse.

Focalisation shapes what aspects of Pacific climate vulnerability are visible, and shapes which aspects of vulnerability are emphasised and how they are represented. For instance, moral appeals that dominate externally narrated accounts eclipse structural or political considerations such as colonial legacies, but also sideline Pacific resilience or adaptation—as evidenced in media headlines that foreground vulnerability through moral and fatalistic imagery (Table 38) (Shea et al., 2021; Tupou & Tiatia, 2020).

Table 38. *Media Extinction Narratives Framing Pacific Islands as Frontlines*

Source (primary)	Quote / Key Phrase	How It Supports the Argument
The Conversation / HuffPost (2025)	“Islands Without a Future?”	Questions the long-term habitability of Pacific islands, framing them as doomed and reinforcing the extinction narrative.
Reuters, disaster commentary (2025)	“On the Brink of Oblivion”	Portrays Pacific islands as facing existential threat, creating a liminal space between survival and erasure.
Climate Action Reports (2010s)	“Pacific: The World’s First Climate Casualty”	Positions Pacific islands as sacrificial frontlines, giving moral weight to climate impacts and reinforcing a narrative of inevitability.

In summation, Pacific vulnerability is not merely a technical or geographic category but a moral and affective narrative with its own agency. This narrative generates a victimhood identity that, while initially descriptive, can be mobilised as a political tool to claim visibility, authority, and influence. Yet, the trajectory of victimhood plot-bound on who frames the story and from what vantage point, highlighting the tension between empowerment and constraint of the Pacific in climate discourse.

4.iii.

Discourse 6: Pacific Agency within Vulnerability

This discourse examines how Pacific peoples navigate and strategically engage with externally imposed constructions of vulnerability in climate politics. That is, by performing the role of the ‘victim’ in global arenas, Pacific agents transform imposed narratives into instruments of moral leverage, political influence, and strategic advocacy.

When the Pacific is viewed from the outside, it is seen as tiny, poor, and isolated. But when viewed from our own perspective, it is a vast world in which peoples and cultures have interacted for thousands of years.

Epeli Hau’ofa (1994)

Hau’ofa (1993) contrasts the historical view of the Pacific as “islands in a far sea,” which emphasises isolation and marginality, with the Pacific Indigenous perspective of “a sea of islands,” highlighting interconnectedness and relationality in global discourse (Wendt, 1993; Figiel, 1996; Perez, 2013). Similarly, the term “Pacific Islands” is commonly employed in climate discourse, denoting small landmasses atop submerged reefs or seamounts (UNEP, 2014 ; IPCC, 2022) reinforcing Western predispositions of remoteness and marginality (Hau’ofa, 1993; Ratuva, 2010; Dun, 2021). In contrast, “Oceania” or terms like “Moana” are less frequently used, though they challenge conventional perceptions and policies by emphasising regional expansiveness and relationality (Hau’ofa, 1993; Teaiwa, 1994; Vaite, 2003; Marsh, 2009; Brown, 2023). In Western institutions or scientific arenas, Pacific nations are often labelled ‘SIDS’, emphasising vulnerability to climate change, economic fragility, and inherent risk (Morrison et al., 2023; Figiel, 1996; Perez, 2013). In response, many Pacific states have actively resisted geographically reductive and pejorative institutional labels, instead promoting the term ‘Large Ocean States’ to assert their stewardship over vast maritime territories, framing themselves as capable, mobile, and relational (Hau’ofa, 1993; Wendt, 1993; Teaiwa, 1994; Marsh, 2009; Powers, 2019; Chan, 2018).

Many Pacific scholars and communities prefer these expansive terms or identities such as ‘Oceanic people’ as an assertion of agency and cultural continuity because Pacific ancestors, whose presence in the region spans more than two millennia, perceived their world through a lens of interconnection—a “sea of islands” rather than a collection of isolated “islands in the sea.” (Hau’ofa, 1993; Wendt, 1993; Figiel, 1996; Perez, 2013; Ahuli’i, 2023; Rigg, 2023; Ramona, 2023).

External discourse represents Pacific peoples as helpless, fragile, and victims, which contrasts sharply with internal narratives of strength, adaptability, and relationality. The main constructive distinction is as follows:

internal self-talk is grounded in agency and relational identity, whereas external-facing narratives is shaped by geopolitical and rhetorical considerations.

Extending from the prior discourse, Pacific peoples are frequently cast as ‘victims’ in climate narratives, a characterisation that diverges markedly from their own self-perception. The reluctance to use ‘Oceania’ in climate discourse is thought to have stemmed from its capacity to evoke vastness and interconnectedness—qualities that unsettle colonial framings and demand a profound shift in how policymakers and external observers perceive and engage with the region (Hau’ofa, 1993; Maurer, 2019, 2021; Titifanue et al., 2017; Lal, 2020; McDonald, 2024; Ferguson et al., 2019). From this observation, I return to the colonial construction of Pacific vulnerability, and continue its narrative; one in which the echoes of colonialism linger, giving rise to new forms of both neocolonial control *and* resistance.

The world of Oceania is neither tiny nor deficient in resources. It was so only as a condition of the colonial confinement that lasted less than a century in a history of millennia.

Human nature demands space for free movement, and the larger the space the better it is for people. Islands have broken out of their confinement, are moving around and away from their homelands, not so much because their countries are poor, but because they were unnaturally confined and severed from many of their traditional sources of wealth, and because it is in their blood to be mobile.

Hau’ofa, *Our Sea of Islands* (1993)

Such interplay of control and resistance emerges as follows: first, as Hau’ofa (1993) reorients our understanding; the inherent mobility of Pacific peoples is more than movement; it is the heartbeat of agency and the vitality of adaptive capacity, carrying them through and beyond the structures of domination. This idea of mobility, historically drawn upon strategically to navigate the territorial and economic impositions of colonial rule (late 18th to mid-20th century), reflects a deeper mode of lingering agency (Hau’ofa, 1993; Standfield, Faleolo & Wallis, 2023; Vunibola, Gauna & Sigavata, 2025; Pacific Climate Change Portal, 2021; Brown, 2023; Kiddle et al., 2021). This form of agency perennate in contemporary Pacific engagements with externally constructed narratives, quietly alive beneath colonial constraints. Selective adaptation and strategic conformity become adroit means of asserting, reclaiming, and reshaping identity and story (Hau’ofa, 1993; Teaiwa, 1994). As outlined in Act I, the constructed vulnerability abstracted it from its political significance and bound Pacific identity under heteronomous objectification. This pre-eminence of such narratorial dominion within climate discourse, coupled with the hegemonic influence of overlooking the colonial legacies embedded *in* these constructions *and* the underlying drivers of vulnerability itself, effectively channels Pacific identity and agency into alternative forms of politicisation (Robinson, 2022; Manushya Foundation, 2023; Weatherill, 2023; Neumann, 2021; Rigg, 2023).

They are once again enlarging their world, establishing new resource bases and expanded networks for circulation.

Hau'ofa, *Our Sea of Islands* (1993)

In effect, under these determinative structural forces, Pacific leaders and communities submit to the victimhood narrative to strategically mobilise it. That is, they leverage emotional and moral perceptions of vulnerability as 'victims' of climate change to garner moral support, secure international support and action, foster regional cohesion, and influence policy engagement (Kataoka, 2025; Pacific Community, 2025; Hall & Persson, 2025; Shibata et al., 2024; Yarina, 2017; Keaka et al., 2025; Frain et al., 2024). A detailed analysis of these practices is provided later in this discourse.

To amalgamate these strands of argument, Pacific actors navigate a neocolonial climate arena in which vulnerability is externally constructed and imposed, compelling them to craft narrative instruments so as to reassert a form of authorship over their stories of vulnerability. While Pacific communities see themselves as empowered and capable, they strategically engage with the pre-inscribed regimes of this discourse; that is, adopting and manipulating the victim character in interactions with the Global North or within global discourse (Farbotko & Lazrus, 2012; Fair, 2020; Petzold & Magnan, 2019; Kelman, 2018). In doing so, Pacific actors not only advance political visibility, moral authority, and global influence, but *also* assert agency within the constraints of colonial discourse. This underscores the strategic role of language as both a reflection of self-perception and a means of negotiating identity, power, and global political contexts (Hau'ofa, 1993; Figiel, 1996; Marsh, 2009; Morrison et al., 2023; Ahuli'i, 2023; Yamamoto, 2025; Teaiwa, 1994; Perez, 2013; Yamamoto, 2025; Cataluna, 2001; Rigg, 2023).

I argue that this discursive maneuvering exemplifies the neocolonial afterlives of colonial discourse. Such arch of engagements is not to suggest a linear or unilateral transmission of narratives from external to internal actors; rather, Pacific actors must move 'within' the narrative to navigate a climate discourse still profoundly shaped by the pre-inscribed narratives of colonial logics and epistemic hierarchies, yet as Fair (2020) reminds us: "Pacific Islanders are not just passive subjects of climate discourse but also skilled navigators of its emotional and political dimensions, at times performing victimhood and at times resisting it."

Of note, such movement is still governed by a Northern moral order, for example, the perceived legitimacy of aid or intervention is measured by the degree of 'victimhood' ascribed by colonial powers.

Also of note, this framing may equally reflect genuine lived vulnerability. Article headlines presented in Table 39 often reflect factual events, and the stories informing the articles of Table 40 convey truthful lived experiences. Yet the harnessing of rhetorical framing and emotional geographies makes vulnerability politically actionable, translating exposure into advocacy, finance, and policy influence.

Table 39. *Headlines Reflecting Lived Vulnerability*

Source / Author	Quote / Key Phrase	How It Supports the Argument
The Guardian (2022)	“Paradise Lost: The Sinking Islands of the Pacific”	Highlights factual sea-level rise events; frames vulnerability for public awareness.
Reuters (2018)	“On the Brink of Oblivion”	Emphasises existential threats; links real events to urgent policy discourse.
HuffPost / The Conversation (2019)	“Islands Without a Future?”	Questions habitability based on observed environmental degradation; combines factual reporting with emotive framing.

Table 40. *Lived Experiences Informing Media Coverage*

Source / Author	Quote / Key Phrase	How It Supports the Argument
Fijian Youth, Lautoka (2023)	“I feel like we are losing our home piece by piece. It’s scary, and I don’t know what the future holds.”	Emotionalises exposure; conveys personal, lived vulnerability.
Vanuatu Elder, Tanna (2022)	“We can see the shoreline changing every year. It’s like our ancestors are disappearing with it.”	Links environmental change to cultural and spiritual loss.
Tuvalu Community Member (2023)	“Every storm makes us more aware that our homes may not last for much longer.”	Highlights lived experience of climate hazards and precarious futures.

Pacific leaders and actors explicitly position their country as the symbolic victims of planetary crisis through language and imagery (Table 41), foregrounding social-ecological concerns (Adger, 2006) and proactively invoking moral responsibility among global audiences (Chakrabarty, 2009). Affective registers—pity, guilt, and ethical obligation—are central to this strategy, transforming structural vulnerability into moral leverage (Table 42) (Mayes & Center, 2022; Spence et al., 2012; Farbotko, 2010). ‘Climate guilt’ directed at the Global North (Table 43) frames distant harms as immediate and psychologically tangible, compelling high-emitting states to act (Aaltola, 2021; Jacobsson & Lindblom, 2016; Pearson et al., 2021).

Table 41. *Strategic Victimhood – Pacific Leaders Positioning Their Nations as Frontlines of Climate Crisis*

Source (primary)	Quote / Key Phrase	How It Supports the Argument
Fiji Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama, COP23 & COP26 (2017, 2021)	“Fiji is on the frontlines of climate change... the difference between 1.5 and 2 degrees is a death sentence for us.”	Positions Fiji as a symbolic victim of planetary crisis, foregrounding social-ecological vulnerability and invoking global moral responsibility.
Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS, 2022)	“Pacific nations are at the forefront of climate impacts, bearing the brunt of a crisis they did not create.”	Reinforces the framing of Pacific countries as symbolic victims, legitimising calls for international policy action and moral accountability.
Tuvalu Foreign Ministry, UN Climate Statements (2020)	“Our islands are disappearing before our eyes; the world must act or we will be lost.” (Delivered standing in knee-deep water)	Articulates existential risk and vulnerability, using powerful visual and emotive imagery to attract global attention, demonstrating victimhood as a strategic tool for advocacy.

Table 42. *Pacific Leaders and Activists Evoking Emotions*

Source (primary)	Quote / Key Phrase	How it Supports the Argument
Rufino Varea, PIKAN (2024)	“By approving four massive coal mines that will unleash 905 million tonnes of carbon pollution—more than double the combined annual emissions of all 14 Pacific Island nations—Australia has betrayed the Pacific and signed a death sentence for our islands.”	Utilises dramatic, affective language to portray the Pacific as doomed, embedding the extinction narrative.
Surangel Whipps Jr., President of Palau, COP26 (2021)	“You might as well bomb our islands.”	Dramatic metaphor stressing existential threat and global inaction.
Commodore Voreqe Bainimarama, Prime Minister of Fiji (2008)	“While the rest of the world continues to endlessly debate the implications of climate change, in the very small islands and atolls in the Pacific, the problem is very much upon	Critiques global inaction, portraying the Pacific as already experiencing the dire consequences of climate change.

	us; it is now a present and very real danger.”	
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Table 43. *Pacific Activists Framing Climate Responsibility and Moral Imperatives*

Source (primary)	Quote / Key Phrase	How it Supports the Argument
Mahealani Delaney, Pacific Climate Warrior, ABC Pacific (2022)	“The future of our islands is tied to what happens here in Australia.”	Interdependence framing: Highlights global responsibility without assigning direct blame.
Anne Pakoa, Vanuatu Human Rights Activist, Climate in the Courts (2023)	“We need justice.”	Justice framing: Calls for accountability without naming specific perpetrators.
Feleti Teo, Prime Minister of Tuvalu, ANU Lecture (2025)	“The grave injustice or irony of the threat of climate change is that climate change is not of our making, but it will certainly remake us.”	Moral framing: Acknowledges injustice without addressing responsibility; emphasises ethical and moral dimensions.

Notably, Fiji’s Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama (2017) symbolically bridges the climate hierarchy by portraying the Global North and South as “in the same canoe”, using a human-centred-and-targeted narratives to foreground universal moral of justice and unity (Boykoff, 2011; Chouliaraki, 2020; Boltanski, 1999). Through storytelling, Pacific actors humanise abstract climate data, bringing forms of their own epistemologies into discourse, positioning them to influence audiences toward policy attention, financial pledges, and symbolic solidarity (Table 44) (Haidt, 2003; Krause, 2018; Hulme, 2009). The effectiveness of these narratives is reflected in global responses (Table 45-46).

Table 44. *Storytelling and Policy Influence in Pacific Climate Discourse*

Source (primary)	Quote / Key Phrase	How it Supports the Argument
Talanoa Dialogue, Bainimarama (2017, 2018)	Recognition of the 1.5°C threshold and institutionalisation of Loss and Damage finance	Demonstrates how Pacific leaders use storytelling and symbolic framing to influence global climate governance and secure finance.
Fiji’s National Climate Change Policy (2018)	Operationalises vulnerability framing to link climate exposure with	Shows national policy translating affective and narrative framing into

	finance and adaptation priorities	actionable adaptation strategies.
Tuvalu's National Adaptation Plan (2017)	Embeds vulnerability discourse into adaptation planning and international engagement	Positions Tuvalu's epistemologies in climate discourse to attract financial support and policy attention.

Table 45. *Global Political and Advocacy Responses to Pacific Narratives*

Source (primary)	Quote / Key Phrase	How it Supports the Argument
Australia's Prime Minister Scott Morrison (Global Citizen, 2021)	"Climate change is the greatest threat to our Pacific family"	Translates Pacific exposure into ethically framed political leverage and pledges additional finance.
Oxfam Pacific	Calls for Loss and Damage finance	Highlights systemic injustice and pressures states to commit finance.
Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF, 2019, 2021)	Advocacy statements and pledges	Uses collective moral authority to influence policy and finance allocations.

Table 46. *Northern Moral Responsibility and Media Framing*

Source (primary)	Quote / Key Phrase	How it Supports the Argument
US State Department climate speech	"The survival of Pacific nations depends on immediate global intervention."	Frames Pacific nations as passive victims and diverts attention from systemic causes of vulnerability.
EU climate forum address (2020)	"We cannot allow these communities to vanish; the North must lead in protecting them."	Prioritises Northern action over local resilience; naturalises vulnerability as inherent.
UK Foreign Office, COP26 statement (2021)	"The world must prevent the disappearance of these islands at any cost."	Reinforces urgency and moral duty, framing islands as passive victims

This discursive engagement reflects the neocolonial afterlives of colonial-anchored narratives: while Pacific actors exercise agency and actively negotiate their identities, such processes remain constrained by persistent adherence to Western epistemic and normative frameworks.

4.iv.

Discourse 7: Trapped in Neocolonial Vulnerability

In propagating a view of hopelessness, I was actively participating in our own belittlement

Hau'ofa, *Our Sea of Islands* (1993)

This discourse examines how the victimhood narrative performs ambivalently, constituting a discursive trap: the narrative is structured within Western-centric dominions that interpret Pacific nations as victims - passive subjects, devoid of agency.

In this configuration, Pacific voices are 'heard' only insofar as they conform to Northern tropes of victimhood or resilience, exemplifying Spivak's (1988) concept of epistemic violence, whereby the subaltern is spoken for or interpreted rather than recognised on their own terms.

When Pacific actors use this narrative to assert agency and amplify voice, their actions are refracted through Western discursive and moral geographies, which redefine, evaluate, and selectively acknowledge them (Farbotko, 2022; Koro et al., 2023; MacGregor, 2023; McNamara & Jackson, 2019; Campbell, 2015). Applied by the Global North, this labelling functions as a political tool and discursive mechanism of belittlement (Lee, 2025; Ratuva, 2022; Shea et al., 2020).

Either way, the victimhood narrative is politicised by the Global North in four layers.

Firstly, attention afforded to Pacific nations as emblematic 'victims' is structured through a discursive economy of 'doom' imagery (Table 47) (Burnett, 2020). Visibility contingent upon a fatalistic lexicon is inherently reductive; the Pacific's presence is defined not only by vulnerability but also denigrated through it, rather than recognised for its agency. For instance, the strategic work of Pacific-led coalitions addressing climate precarity are overshadowed by their media portrayals that frequently deploy victim tropes (Table 48). Pacific leaders criticise Western media for privileging fatalistic images that dominate international climate coverage, claiming it to simplify complexity of Pacific experiences, nullify Pasifika political significance, and subordinate systemic challenges to stories of helplessness (Table 49) (East-West Centre, 2022; Asia Times, 2022; Farbotko, 2010; Shea, Painter & Osaka, 2020; Kataoka, 2025; McNamara & Farbotko, 2017; Fair, 2018; Ledderucci, 2021; Takahashi & Tandoc, 2021; Shea et al., 2021; Lee, 2025; Ratuva, 2022; Mitchell, 2023; Loto et al., 2006; Naepi & Manuela, 2019; Swan, 2022).

Table 47. *Discursive Construction of Pacific Nations as ‘Victims’ through Doom Imagery*

Source (primary)	Quote / Key Phrase	How it Supports the Argument
Bainimarama, F. (2017)	“The difference between 1.5 and 2 degrees is a death sentence for us.”	Positions Fiji as an emblematic victim of climate change, invoking existential urgency.
Solih, M. (2021)	“A death sentence looms over our islands if emissions continue.”	Uses catastrophic imagery to construct Pacific nations as imperiled, reinforcing the victimhood narrative.
Tuvalu Foreign Ministry, UN Climate Statements (2020)	“We are on the frontlines of climate change, and there is no escape.”	Frames Tuvalu as emblematic of the region’s vulnerability, stressing inevitability and helplessness.

Table 48. *Strategic Pacific Climate Action Overshadowed by Victim Tropes*

Source (Primary)	Quote / Key Phrase	How it Supports the Argument
Pacific Climate Action Network (PCAN), UN Climate Action Summit (2019)	“We are demanding loss-and-damage finance; our future depends on urgent action.”	Demonstrates proactive political and strategic advocacy by Pacific actors.
The Guardian (2021)	“Pacific islands are sinking; they have no hope without Northern intervention.”	Highlights how media coverage frames Pacific nations as passive victims, overshadowing their strategic agency.
Tuvalu Foreign Ministry, UN Climate Statements (2020)	“We stand here at the frontlines of climate change, pleading for justice.”	Reflects both the emotive framing and ongoing leadership in climate advocacy.

Table 49. *Pacific Leaders Critiquing Western Media Fatalism*

Source (Primary)	Quote / Key Phrase	How it Supports the Argument
Tuvalu Foreign Ministry, UN Climate Statements (2020)	“Media often shows Tuvalu as disappearing, but we are actively building resilience and advancing climate solutions.”	Challenges fatalistic imagery, emphasising proactive local adaptation efforts.
Pacific Climate Action Network	“Stories of helpless islands make headlines, but they	Shows civil society critique of media

(PCAN), UN Climate Action Summit (2019)	erase the strategies and advocacy we are already implementing.”	narratives that overshadow local climate action.
Samoa’s Ministry of Natural Resources & Environment, UNFCCC (2022)	“International reporting reduces Samoa’s climate story to images of drowning islands, neglecting ongoing systemic adaptation and policy efforts.”	Highlights the simplification of complex realities in international media coverage.

As these tropes become bound to the Pacific’s climate discourse identity—which is itself increasingly codified and constrained by colonial powers—many Pacific actors actively resist imposed victimisation and pity (Table 50). Nevertheless, persistent efforts to challenge victimhood tropes reveal the enduring influence of Western-centric discourses—deliberate or inadvertent—which continue to reframe Pacific narratives of urgency, adaptive action, and lived impacts as passive suffering (Farbotko, 2010; Shea, Painter & Osaka, 2020; Kataoka, 2025; McNamara & Farbotko, 2017; Fair, 2018; Ledderucci, 2021). Such epistemic violence creates a representational economy in which visibility is conditional upon adherence to Western tropes of suffering, rendering Pacific nations legible only as victims and constraining acknowledgment of their adaptive and political agency (Farbotko & Lazrus, 2012; Burnett, 2020).

Table 50. *Pacific Actors Resisting Victimisation in Climate Discourse*

Source (Primary)	Quote / Key Phrase	How it Supports the Argument
Fijian Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama, COP26 (2021)	“We are on the frontlines, yes, but we are not powerless. Our people are leading climate action and demanding justice.”	Counters victim framing by highlighting leadership and agency in climate negotiations.
The Guardian Pacific Project (2023)	“We are more than a sinking paradise. Vulnerability isn’t a natural state – it’s manufactured by global neglect.”	Media framing that challenges environmental determinism, emphasising agency and structural causes.
Pacific Climate Action Network / Community Voices (2022)	“We are not drowning; we are fighting.”	Expresses active resistance to externally imposed narratives of helplessness, asserting local agency.

Secondly, this symbolic containment operates through the postcolonial spectacle: Pacific vulnerability is rendered consumable for Northern moral and emotional frameworks rather than recognised as political reality (Teaiwa, 1994; Chaturvedi & Doyle, 2010). Visibility functions as a double bind: while

attention ostensibly affirms Pacific importance, recognition is conditional upon suffering. The persistent fatalistic lexicon produces a narrow, commodified identity in which Pacific nations are defined by precarity rather than agency, transforming lived realities into imagery for global spectatorship (Burnett, 2020). As Teaiwa (1994) notes, this creates a paradox in which the Pacific is simultaneously hypervisible and invisible: seen everywhere but understood nowhere.

The irony of the nuclear age is that it has rendered Pacific Islanders both hypervisible and invisible — at once the world's most irradiated bodies and its most erased.

Teresia Teaiwa (1994)

The corollary of this persistent spectacle is that Pacific nations are tokenised as monolithic victims, relegated to passive objects of concern rather than recognised as active participants. Their experiences are flattened into a homogenised image of helplessness (refer to Table 49) subsumed within a global performance of empathy that privileges the spectator's perspective.

Consequently, the Pacific's climate identity becomes a stage-managed representation—what Chaturvedi and Doyle (2010) describe as a “politics of performance”—where the region functions as a screen upon which the Global North projects its moral and emotional narratives, overwriting local agency or rewriting self-determined stories of resilience or adaptation as consumable spectacle.

Therefore, spectatorship creates moral distance: suffering is made visible primarily to reassure Northern audiences rather than to foster solidarity or accountability. Pacific vulnerability thus becomes a form of symbolic currency, where visibility depends on performing helplessness (Boltanski, 1999).

That is, as my third point, victimhood enables external actors to preserve moral authority while evading structural accountability, enacting what Feldman (2015) and Ticktin (2011) describe as a “humanitarian gaze,” in which displays of empathy and care substitute for political action. Drawing on Chakrabarty's (2009) conceptualisation of climate responsibility—where “climate change conjures up emotions of guilt and responsibility among the global North,” yet these emotions are “partly shaped by narratives that emphasize distant victims”—Northern empathy simultaneously enacts moral concern and reproduces distance. Through this dynamic, the Pacific is positioned as an object of feeling, or in Boltanski's (1999) terms, the ‘pity of politics,’ rather than as a subject of politics: an externalised site through which Northern actors perform virtue while keeping responsibility and the realities of vulnerability at arm's length.

I got frustrated with the sympathy: ‘I don’t want your sympathy, what I would like you to do is do something about it’.

Fei’iloakitau Kaho Tevi (2014)

Tevi’s (2014) frustration encapsulates the disjuncture between Pacific calls for responsibility and Northern emotional responses. While Pacific actors strategically mobilise emotion to evoke empathy and urgency, these appeals are often abstracted from their political intent and absorbed as sentimental expressions that reinforce moral spectacle rather than material engagement. Within this emotional economy, industrialised states perform virtue while evading culpability: pity and compassion displace guilt, catalysing compassion over structural transformation (Chakrabarty, 2009; Betzold, 2015). As Helsinki (2020) observes, vulnerability discourse “naturalizes suffering and loss and draws attention away from mitigation... Images of sinking islands and masses of refugees become natural inevitabilities of the future, only relevant as a threat to Western societies.” In this way, Pacific precarity is depoliticised, *and* aestheticised (Table 51) with moral feeling substituting for justice and empathy functioning as an instrument of control rather than catalysts for structural change.

Table 51. *Depoliticisation and Aestheticisation of Pacific Precarity*

Source (Primary)	Quote / Key Phrase	How it Supports the Argument
Tuvalu Foreign Ministry, UN Climate Statements (2020)	Delivered kneeling: “Tuvalu is facing an existential threat, and the world must act.”	Positions vulnerability as a moral spectacle; empathy is elicited rather than structural accountability pursued.
Fiji Prime Minister, Frank Bainimarama, COP23 (2017)	“The difference between 1.5 and 2 degrees is a death sentence for us.”	Uses dramatic imagery to elicit moral response; frames climate precarity as aestheticised existential threat.
Oxfam Pacific, Loss and Damage Advocacy (2019)	“Pacific nations are on the frontlines; the North must act to prevent catastrophe.”	Reinforces vulnerability as visual/emotional narrative; obscures political causes and structural responsibility.

Referring to Tables 45 and 46, the emotional journey, labour or discomfort of the Global North is centred, with no systemic interrogation of the political and historical conditions that give rise to such emotions (Haidt, 2003; Chakrabarty, 2009; Farbotko, 2005). Instead, these affective regimes operationalise the politics of pity: visibility is contingent upon passivity, reinforcing reductive portrayals of helplessness while simultaneously affirming the Global North’s moral authority, enacting a humanitarian gaze, and distancing it from structural responsibility (Boltanski, 1999; Shea et al., 2020; Lee, 2025; Feldman, 2015; Ticktin, 2011).

In this configuration, emotion operates as moral currency: guilt and compassion become proxies for engagement, signalling ethical awareness while displacing accountability (Nielsen & Gamborg, 2024; Nielsen et al., 2024). This dynamic privileges emotional recognition over structural redress, sustaining representational hierarchies that valorise pity over partnership and agency (Quenga, 2023).

Lastly, within this affective economy, neocolonial actors engage in affective governance—reconfiguring emotion to sustain dependency and control. Representations of Pacific vulnerability are selectively shaped to align with Northern moral imperatives, determining which voices, actions, and experiences are recognised, amplified, or silenced. Victimhood thus becomes a performative tool: Pacific nations gain visibility only insofar as their suffering aligns with Northern affective priorities. In a different register, Pacific appeals may also become entrapped within this emotional economy: intended as a moral provocation, they risk being absorbed into paternalistic or defensive Northern responses - avoidance, denial, or mockery (Table 52) (Wettergren, 2017; Springer, 2021) - rather than political action and moral accountability (Springer, 2021; Jensen, 2019; Jacquet, 2015; Mkono & Hughes, 2020; Baek & Yoon, 2017). ‘Climate guilt’ can further mutate into ‘climate shame’ (Table 53) - a more pervasive moral and existential distress that frames anthropogenic climate change as universal human failure (Christoffersen, 2025; Nielsen & Gamborg, 2024; Nielsen, Gamborg & Lund, 2024; Springer, 2021). This diffuses differentiated responsibility and further paralysing collective action and rendered guilt-provoked social and political friction (Table 54). Guilt-focused, pity-driven or denial-oriented responses inadvertently reinforce tropes of helplessness and external burden (Table 55)—the very representational frames that initially structured the discourse (Quenga, 2023).

Table 52. *Defensive Northern Reactions to Pacific Appeals*

Source (Primary)	Quote / Key Phrase	How it Supports the Argument
Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong	"Australia contributes just over 1% of global emissions... often faces more Pacific criticism than countries like China and the U.S."	Deflects blame to larger emitters; undermines Pacific calls for accountability.
Australian PM Anthony Albanese	"The project is expected to emit an additional 4.3 billion tons of carbon... undermines Australia's efforts to portray itself as a climate leader."	Justifies fossil fuel projects; diminishes Pacific concerns over fossil fuel exports.
US President Donald Trump	"Climate change is a hoax."	Denial of climate science; discredits Pacific nations' climate realities.

Table 53. *Guilt-Focused or Moralised Northern Responses*

Source (Primary)	Quote / Key Phrase	How it Supports the Argument
French President Emmanuel Macron	"Climate change adds further injustice to an already unfair world."	Moral framing acknowledges injustice without addressing responsibility; highlights injustice but avoids confronting French role.
German Chancellor Angela Merkel	"Climate change is an issue determining our destiny as mankind – it will determine the well-being of all of us."	Universal framing; generalises responsibility, diluting specific accountability.
European Union (EU)	"The EU is a steady and reliable partner for the Pacific Islands."	Positions EU as benevolent donor; frames Pacific as recipients rather than co-equal partners.

Table 54. *Guilt-Provoked Social and Political Friction*

Source (Primary)	Quote / Key Phrase	How it Supports the Argument
French President Emmanuel Macron, COP23	"Climate change adds further injustice to an already unfair world."	Frames climate responsibility as moral guilt; can generate tension by diffusing concrete accountability.
German Chancellor Angela Merkel, COP23	"Climate change is an issue determining our destiny as mankind – it will determine the well-being of all of us."	Universal framing creates diffuse responsibility, paralysing targeted collective action.
EU External Action	"Prosperity and security of our regions are linked."	Links Northern and Pacific priorities; may create friction and obscure local agency.

Table 55. *Guilt-Focused, Pity-Driven, or Denial-Oriented Responses*

Source (Primary)	Quote / Key Phrase	How it Supports the Argument
UNFCCC representative (Western delegation)	"Small island states are on the frontlines, and it is up to the world to save them."	Evokes pity; reinforces helplessness trope, framing Pacific as passive.
US State Department climate speech	"The survival of Pacific nations depends on	Frames Pacific nations as passive victims;

	immediate global intervention."	deflects attention from systemic causes.
The Guardian / CNN	"Pacific islands are drowning; we must act for them before it's too late."	Pity-driven media framing; amplifies helplessness and external burden.

While my island nations sinks, Australia is doing nothing to solve climate change...As we reflect on the frightening future ahead of us, there is no escaping the deep injustice of the fact that, despite our negligible contributions to greenhouse gas emissions, we are on the frontline of climate change consequences.

Anote Tong (2018)

In summation, the persistence of affective and representational hierarchies reveals how discourses of Pacific vulnerability function as technologies of control rather than recognition. Pacific nations are rendered legible only through the grammar of loss. Visibility is conditional upon subordination: to be seen is to be pitied, and to be pitied is to be politically contained, exemplifying Spivak's (1988) epistemic violence. Resilience, adaptation, and political acumen are recast as helplessness, reinforcing Northern moral centrality, shielding high-emitting states from accountability, and entrenching a structural asymmetry that denies Pacific nations justice, but also recognition for their agency and strategic action.

To acknowledge the larger reality would be to undermine the prevailing view and to frustrate certain agendas and goals of powerful interests.

Epeli Hau'ofa (1993)

Moving beyond the symbolic containment of the Pacific requires more than diversifying representation. It necessitates a structural reorientation of climate discourse itself. Decentering Northern moral geographies and engaging with Pacific epistemologies of resilience, relationality, and stewardship is essential to disentangle vulnerability from subjugation. Only then can the Pacific emerge not as a mirror for Northern morality, but as a sovereign site of political, ecological, and imaginative possibility, where agency and adaptive capacity are acknowledged alongside vulnerability.

5.

Act III: The Solution to the Vulnerability Narrative

The inherent limits of decolonisation were laid bare by the historical peculiarities of colonialism in the region.

Tracey Banivanua Ma (2018)

Building directly on Discourse 7, the saviour-driven trajectory in Act III emerges as a logical extension of the victimhood narrative and its entangled affective economy. The previous act demonstrated how Pacific vulnerability is codified through Northern-centric tropes, where visibility, recognition, and political significance are contingent upon passivity, suffering, and adherence to reductive frames of helplessness. These discursive and moral hierarchies produce a system in which Northern actors assume authority over interpretation, action, and moral responsibility. Consequently, the ‘solution’ that materialises is not rooted in addressing historical, structural, or systemic causes of vulnerability, but rather in rescuing the Pacific itself—foregrounding external intervention over local agency, knowledge, or adaptive capacity

In this way, Act III is constructed differently from Acts I and II, which followed a chronological and discursive progression of discourses emergent from tropes. Act III presents the consequences that unfold from the ascendancy of preceding tropes, whose enduring dominance produces a single trajectory within the narrative of Pacific vulnerability; that is, Pacific communities are positioned as requiring external rescue as the solution to the vulnerabilities being narrated (Discourse 8).

In this thesis, I have found that the climate discourse’s narrative of vulnerability presupposes its conclusion: interventions and responses emerge not from Pacific agency or knowledge, but from externally imposed logics that reinforce the very dynamics that constructed vulnerability in the first place. My own structure reflects this dynamic—where Act I-II traced a discursive journey of construction and politicisation, mapping the narrational trajectory of the discourses, whereas Act III becomes less a continuation than a constrained resolution, illustrating how vulnerability is narratively closed off into pre-determined outcomes rather than open possibilities, echoing the colonial logics that historically wrote conclusions to Pacific stories. This approach reflects my engagement with the narrative of vulnerability itself: I interrogate how it is constructed (the building of the foundational discourses), how it is mobilised (the politicisation of meaning), and for what purpose (allowing the tropes and discourses themselves to dictate the conclusion rather than imposing my own), highlighting the ways in which vulnerability is both narrated and constrained.

I place my story beside the sprawling saga of colonial domination, positioning my narrative within the persistent colonial forces that carve the world we inherit; recognising that the historical trajectory and global imprint of colonisation embody inherent limits on systemic change (Banivanua Ma, 2018)

I acknowledge that my thesis concludes with what might be seen as a foregone conclusion; however, I also recognise that this outcome is the result of the narrational trajectory of tropes and discourses that guided my analysis. I did not set out to reach this endpoint, yet the conclusion underscores my argument that, without systemic intervention—encompassing structural, epistemic, and representational reforms—colonial powers continue to shape and dominate the narratives of our world.

5.i.

Trope 3: The Pacific Need of Saving

Table No.	Table Name
56	Western Projection of Rescue Narratives onto Pasifika
57	Moral Pretext of Colonisation and Pacific “Rescue”
58	Pacific Dependency and Passive Victimhood as a Discursive Construct
59	Moral Alibi and the Justification of Intervention
60	Layering Global North Moral Burden and Pacific Helplessness
61	Sidestepping Colonial Accountability and Nullifying Pacific Agency
62	Hyper-visibility of Suffering vs Peripheral Influence
63	Externalised Solutions and Hierarchical Power in Pacific Climate Governance
64	Climate Necropolitics and Saviourship Narratives
65	Climate Apartheid and Global Inequities
66	Colonial Legacies in Contemporary Climate Finance and Aid
67	Bureaucratic Barriers and Structural Reliance in Climate Finance
68	Conditionality and Northern Prioritisation in Climate Finance
69	Discursive Reinforcement of Pacific Dependency

5.ii.

Discourse 8: Saviourship Narrative

We are constantly portrayed as passive and dependent, a people waiting to be helped, a people without agency.

Epeli Hau'ofa (1993)

Following the dynamics outlined in Discourse 7, the Saviourship Narrative reveals how Pacific vulnerability is leveraged to produce Northern authority and moral centrality. Rather than addressing structural causes or recognising local agency, this discourse frames Pacific communities as objects of rescue, justifying external intervention, policy, and aid. By emphasising helplessness, Western actors assert themselves as moral saviours, while sidelining Indigenous knowledge, adaptive strategies, and self-determination (Aguon, 2019; Farbotko, 2005; Barnett & Campbell, 2010). In effect, the Saviourship Narrative builds directly on the epistemic and affective hierarchies discussed in the previous acts, converting the visibility of suffering into a tool for interventionist power rather than empowerment.

In this discourse, 'saviourship' is a mode of neo-colonial paternalism; a performative benevolence that conceals domination beneath the moral guise of help, reproducing the hierarchies through which Pacific vulnerability is sustained (Banivanua Mar, 2003; Fair, 2017; Aguon, 2015; Kuper, 2016; Connell, 2007; Cox, 2018; Barnett, 2001; Firth, 2003; Hau'ofa, 1993; Macpherson, 2009; Sahlins, 1985; Frazer, 2014; Thomas, 2018; Lata, 2010; Nunn, 2013; Teaiwa, 1995; Tengan, 2010; Hau'ofa, 2008; Morrison et al., 2023; Kaho Tevi, 2014; Boera, 2019; Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Quijano, 2000; Grosfoguel, 2011; Tuck & Yang, 2012; Smith, 2012; Mohanty, 2003; Said, 1978; Bhabra, 2014).

In *global* discourse, Western actors habitually project storylines onto Pasifika narratives, reanimating the colonial fiction of the Pacific's need for rescue (Table 56) (Edmond, 1997; Chappell, 1995; Barnett & Campbell, 2010; Fair, 2020; Farbotko, 2005; Kataoka, 2025; Mitchell, 2023; Thomas, 1990; Hau'ofa, 1993; Behlmer, 2020).

Such a postulate—that the Pacific required saving—is embedded in the broader supposition that colonisation was justified as a civilising endeavour; a moral pretext that cast Indigenous peoples suitable for external intervention (Table 57) (Kipling, 1899; Sepúlveda, 1550; de las Casas, 1552; Farbotko, 2005; Edmond, 1997; Behlmer, 2020; Barnett & Campbell, 2010; Fair, 2020; Kataoka, 2025; Mitchell, 2023; Thomas, 1990; Hau'ofa, 1993).

Table 56. *Western Projection of Rescue Narratives onto Pasifika*

Source (Primary)	Quote / Key Phrase	How it Supports the Argument
Captain James Cook, <i>Journal of the Endeavour Voyage</i> (1770)	Describes islands as “remote and needing guidance from civilised nations.”	Early colonial framing positions Pacific as dependent and in need of external intervention.
Lord Durham, <i>Report on the Affairs of British North America</i> (1839)	Refers to colonised peoples as “incapable of self-governance without oversight.”	Constructs a template of moral and political authority that is projected onto Pacific governance.
US Naval Reports on Pacific Islands (1899)	“The islands require protection from external threats and internal disorder.”	Reinforces Pacific as passive and vulnerable; naturalises external control under the guise of protection.

Table 57. *Moral Pretext of Colonisation and Pacific “Rescue”*

Source (Primary)	Quote / Key Phrase	How it Supports the Argument
Reverend John Williams, <i>Missionary Journals</i> (1830)	Describes Pacific Islanders as “heathens who must be guided to civilisation and God’s truth.”	Illustrates the moral justification for intervention framed as saving souls and “civilising” the islands.
British Colonial Office, <i>Dispatches on the Western Pacific</i> (1877)	“The natives are incapable of self-rule and require oversight for their own good.”	Casts colonisation as a benevolent duty; positions Pacific people as dependent recipients of governance.
U.S. Naval Reports, <i>Pacific Islands Administration</i> , (1900)	“Our presence is necessary to protect these peoples from chaos and mismanagement.”	Frames intervention as both protection and civilising mission, embedding the “rescue” narrative.

These dynamics permeate climate and development discourse, for instance, narratives of moral saviours rely on the discourse that Pacific communities are too ‘small’ for structural adaptiveness and too ‘isolated’ for legitimate self-governance (Discourse 3). Yet, these imaginaries are derived from the Pacific’s purported remoteness relative to European centres during colonial expansion, suggesting that narratives of saviourship in climate discourse function less as reflections of geographic reality and more as discursive instruments of control and authority.

The explanation seems clear: one way or another, they or nearly all of them are involved directly or indirectly in the fields of aided development and Pacific rim geopolitics, for whose purposes it is necessary to portray our huge world in tiny, needy bits.

Epeli Hau'ofa (1993)

Over the arc of the Pacific vulnerability narrative, the region emerges as emblematic of “doom, disaster, and development” (Chaturvedi and Doyle, 2016) - a discursive construct that perpetuates dependency and positions Pacific islanders as passive victims awaiting external salvation in climate discourse (Table 58) (Kapoor, 2013; Jefferess, 2008; Fassin, 2012; Walia, 2013; Hughey, 2014; Spivak, 1988; Bryant-Tokalau, 2018).

Table 58. *Pacific Dependency and Passive Victimhood as a Discursive Construct*

Source (Primary)	Quote / Key Phrase	How it Supports the Argument
Reverend John Williams, <i>Missionary Journals</i> (1830)	Pacific Islanders “must be guided and protected, for they cannot help themselves.”	Early moral framing positions Pacific people as dependent and unable to act autonomously.
Tuvalu Foreign Ministry, COP Statements (2020)	Fiji and Tuvalu described as “frontlines of climate change, in need of urgent global support.”	Contemporary climate discourse mirrors colonial-era dependency framing, casting islands as passive recipients of aid.
UNFCCC, COP26 Statements (2021)	“Small island states are on the frontlines, and the world must act to save them.”	Reinforces the victimhood narrative, creating moral obligations for Northern actors while limiting recognition of local agency.

This narrative consolidates, *and* enshrines, the moral authority of external actors, casting them as indispensable arbiters of solutions while rendering Pacific solutions peripheral. It operates both overtly, through political and humanitarian claims, and covertly, through enduring colonial imaginaries that naturalise hierarchical relations between the Global North and the Pacific (Kapoor, 2013; Jefferess, 2008).

Through the continued prevalence of Tropes 1 and 2, which have underpinned the narrative of Pacific vulnerability thus far, the Global North is positioned as a morally compelled arbiter of crisis, conferring upon it epistemic primacy in defining, interpreting, and, now, responding to vulnerability. This positioning, in turn, ensures their interventions remain rhetorically cloaked in the mantle of benevolence (Sultana, 2022; Barnett & Campbell, 2010; McNamara & Gibson, 2009). Benevolence in this register is instrumental and illusory: it provides a moral and ethical rationale for

intervention while masking the political and epistemic power weighted in such acts. Pratt's (1992) 'anti-conquest' rhetoric describes the coloniser's ability to appear an innocent observer while exercising control. In the context of Pacific vulnerability, this manifests as a moral stage where affective registers—pity, guilt, and compassion—choreograph compliance, rendering external action ostensibly ethically imperative (Said, 1978; Spivak, 1988; Bhabha, 1994; Aguon, 2019; Teaiwa, 2005; Fanon, 1961; Mbembe, 2001; Gandhi, 1998; Mohanty, 2003).

And so, beneath this ostensibly altruistic façade, such interventions quietly obfuscate the calculated accrual of control, entrench asymmetries as normative, and perpetuate neocolonial paternalism under the guise of moral duty (Jefferess, 2008; Farbotko, 2005). That is, the moral economy of saviourship does not simply legitimise external authority; it also produces secondary discursive effects that shape the contours of climate politics in the Pacific. Chief among these is the displacement of historical and structural responsibility onto moralised narratives of humanitarian duty (McNamara & Gibson, 2009; Barnett & Campbell, 2010).

As the sentimental politics of the victim discourses privilege emotional appeal over structural accountability, colonial powers justify interventions as morally indispensable duties – a political alibi - toward purportedly dependent communities, rather than as obligations arising from their historical and structural *complicity* in creating the conditions of Pacific dependency and precarity (Table 59). This curated performance of benevolence deepens the weight of presumed helplessness and incapacity upon Pacific communities; layering the Global North's the assumed moral 'burden' and blame heaped upon the Pacific *atop* burdens they have already borne and continue to bear (Table 60). It follows that accountability for the colonial architectures that forged such burdens is sidestepped *anew* (or deliberately negated), while the capacity of Pacific communities to act autonomously in addressing these burdens is effectively nullified (Table 61).

Table 59. *Moral Alibi and the Justification of Intervention*

Source (Primary)	Quote / Key Phrase	How it Supports the Argument
UNFCCC, COP26 Statements (2021)	"The world must act to save small island states."	Frames Northern intervention as morally indispensable, obscuring structural responsibility and local agency.
Tuvalu Foreign Ministry, UN Statement (2020)	"Our islands are on the frontlines, and urgent action is needed from the global community."	Positions Pacific nations as dependent, eliciting moral duty rather than accountability for systemic causes.
Australian Government,	"Australia stands ready to support Pacific neighbours in their	Reinforces a benevolent intervention narrative, portraying Pacific

Climate Statement (2019)	fight against climate impacts.”	vulnerability as requiring external management.
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Table 60. *Layering Global North Moral Burden and Pacific Helplessness*

Source (Primary)	Quote / Key Phrase	How it Supports the Argument
Fijian Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama, COP23 (2017)	“We are on the frontlines, yes, but we are not powerless.”	Demonstrates tension: Pacific leaders acknowledge responsibility yet highlight how Northern moral framing compounds perceived helplessness.
PCAN, UN Climate Action Summit (2019)	“The world sees us as victims; we see ourselves as survivors.”	Counters external victim framing; highlights how moralised aid narratives can overshadow local agency.
The Guardian, Pacific Coverage (2023)	Headlines emphasising “sinking islands”	Media narratives reinforce helplessness and imply moral responsibility lies with the North.

Table 61. *Sidestepping Colonial Accountability and Nullifying Pacific Agency*

Source (Primary)	Quote / Key Phrase	How it Supports the Argument
UNFCCC, COP Statements (2021)	“Immediate global support is essential to protect small island states.”	Focus on immediate aid sidelines structural causes rooted in historical colonial and industrial practices.
Tuvalu Government, National Adaptation Plan (2017)	“We rely on international assistance to implement adaptation measures.”	Institutionalises dependency, limiting recognition of Pacific-led solutions and autonomy.
Fiji Government, National Climate Change Policy (2018)	“National priorities align with funding from international partners.”	Reinforces reliance on Northern finance, constraining local agency and reframing structural vulnerabilities as externally solvable.

Accordingly, the Pacific, cast as hyper-visible sites of suffering, remains peripheral both in its representation in discourse and in the decision-making processes of the Global North (Table 62) (Teaiwa, 1994). In this configuration, moral authority is, once more, recentred in the hands of external saviours, who, under the pretext of saviourism, constrain the practical agency and undermine the adaptive resolve of those it ostensibly seeks to serve

(McNamara & Gibson, 2009; Farbotko, 2005; Nixon, 2011; Sultana, 2022; Chakrabarty, 2009; Shea et al., 2021; Klepp & Herbeck, 2016; Chand, 2023).

Table 62. *Hyper-visibility of Suffering vs Peripheral Influence*

Source (Primary)	Quote / Key Phrase	How it Supports the Argument
UNFCCC, COP26 Statements (2021)	“Small island states are on the frontlines and must be saved by the international community.”	Highlights visibility in discourse while framing Pacific nations as passive, marginalising their role in decision-making.
Tuvalu Foreign Ministry, UN Climate Statements (2020)	“Our islands are facing existential threats; urgent action is needed from the global North.”	Emphasises suffering and exposure but reflects limited agency in shaping global policy responses.
Fiji Government, National Adaptation Policy (2018)	“National priorities align with international funding and guidance.”	Shows dependence on external actors; decisions largely influenced by Northern agendas, underscoring peripherality.

Aid may bring material relief, but it often conceals the rich network of human ingenuity and adaptation that has always existed in our islands.

Epeli Hau'ofa (1993)

Ultimately, this dynamic entrenches a hierarchical geography of power, anchored in colonial logic, in which solutions are imagined, designed, and enacted from outside the region (Table 63). By reproducing paternalistic relations under the guise of humanitarianism or climate action, such practices perpetuate the very neocolonial structures they claim to redress, effectively dehumanising those subjected to its governance and subordinating, and in some cases appropriating, local agency to global authority (DeBoom, 2022; Holden, 2023; Sultana, 2022; Cole, 2012; Fitzmaurice, 2025; Rudiak-Gould, 2020; Kataoka, 2025).

Table 63. *Externalised Solutions and Hierarchical Power in Pacific Climate Governance*

Source (Primary)	Quote / Key Phrase	How it Supports the Argument
UNFCCC COP26 Statements (2021)	“Small island states require international support to implement adaptation measures.”	Positions solutions as externally designed; reinforces hierarchical power over Pacific agency.
World Bank Pacific Climate	“Projects will be managed in collaboration with local	Illustrates external control in planning and

Adaptation Program (2020)	authorities but driven by global technical standards.”	implementation; local priorities are secondary.
Asian Development Bank, Pacific Climate Investments (2019)	“Funding mechanisms are structured to ensure accountability to international donors.”	Highlights how decision-making is anchored outside the region, reinforcing colonial logic of control.

As such, I assert that this process and its attendant realities manifest contemporary colonisation, entwining control with care. Historical patterns of subjugation are projected onto contemporary narratives and the material world; the Pacific’s development trajectories and engagement with climate narratives are thereby predetermined (Aguon et al., 2019; Hezel, 1968; MacLellan, 2015; Futaiasi et al., 2023).

Materially, as I will explore, they generate and intensify interconnected discursive consequences—including necropolitics, climate apartheid, and structural dependency—that reinforce hierarchies, exacerbate vulnerability, and limit Pacific agency.

Necropolitics, the selective exercise of power over life and death, producing “death-worlds” where populations are rendered socially, politically, and economically expendable (Mbembe, 2003), finds discursive expression and material sustenance in saviourship narratives (Peters, Clare & Davies, 2024). By defining whose lives are deemed “worthy of saving” and whose vulnerabilities can be mobilised for global moral performance, this discourse enacts structural and slow violence through exclusion from decision-making, obfuscation of local agency, and the bureaucratisation of survival (DeBoom, 2020; Sultana, 2022). Climate necropolitics demonstrates that authority operates not only through coercion but also through the symbolic construction of dependency and helplessness, reducing Pacific peoples to objects of care rather than active agents (Table 64) (Nosacka, 2024; Peters, Clare & Davies, 2024). Ostensibly protective interventions by Global North actors therefore reproduce patterns of dispossession, domination, and dehumanisation, embedding incremental harms within the architecture of global climate politics while obscuring historical and structural responsibility (Sultana, 2022; Farbotko, 2005).

Table 64. *Climate Necropolitics and Saviourship Narratives*

Source (Primary)	Quote / Key Phrase	How it Supports the Argument
UNFCCC Reports	References Pacific nations as “vulnerable states in need of support”	Positions Pacific peoples as passive recipients, reinforcing dependency narratives

UN General Assembly Resolutions	Calls for international protection of small island states from climate risks	Highlights symbolic authority that defines who is “worthy of saving”
Local NGO Reports (Pacific Islands)	Reports show exclusion from decision-making in externally funded projects	Reveals material mechanisms of necropolitical control in practice

These necropolitical dynamics are at the heart of climate apartheid, wherein wealthier, predominantly Global North populations shield themselves from climate impacts while historically marginalised and colonised communities bear disproportionate harm (Table 65). This dynamic exacerbates global inequities and entrenches racialised and economic hierarchies in vulnerability and adaptive capacity (Roberts & Parks, 2007; Klein, 2020; Tuana, 2019).

Crucially, this inequality is rooted in a historical continuum of extraction: during the colonial and industrial eras, Pacific resources were systematically appropriated to fuel European industrialisation and global capitalist expansion, while local communities were confined to structurally subordinate economies and labour regimes (Bagchi, 1972; Lal, 1992; Connell, 1997; Poray-Wybranowska, 2020; Wallerstein, 1974; Wolfe, 2006). Colonial interventions produced a paradox of resource-rich but development-poor islands, embedding dependency, weakening local governance, and artificially rendering environments and economies ‘remote’ and ‘fragile’, laying the structural foundations for contemporary climate apartheid (Filer & Gabriel, 2018; Fraenkel, 2004; Hau’ofa, 1993; Lal, 2012). That is, contemporary climate finance and development aid extend this extractive logic under the guise of protection. Wealthy actors continue to profit and shield themselves from environmental risks in a necropolitical manner; determining the economic outcomes and framing of climate vulnerability by dictating when, how, and where support is delivered, while simultaneously extracting value from Pacific nations through conditional funding, donor-driven agendas, and reliance on external intermediaries (Table 66) (Futaiasi et al., 2023; UNDP & PIF, 2022; Bhavnani et al., 2019). Aid and development mechanisms mirror the historical logic of colonial paternalism: colonial administrations construct extractive economies explicitly designed to funnel wealth outward, restrict local autonomy, and reinforce the very vulnerabilities they purport to ameliorate.

Table 65. *Climate Apartheid and Global Inequities*

Source (Primary)	Quote / Key Phrase	How it Supports the Argument
UNDP & PIF Reports (2022)	Aid prioritises adaptation in ways aligned with Northern interests	Shows structural inequity in who bears climate risk vs. who is shielded

Fiji National Climate Change Policy (2018)	Links vulnerability assessment to funding priorities	Illustrates local navigation within externally imposed frameworks
Statements from Pacific Leaders (e.g., Hau'ofa, 1993)	"Whatever remained of our resources...was being hawked for the highest bid"	Highlights ongoing economic marginalisation post-independence

Table 66. *Colonial Legacies in Contemporary Climate Finance and Aid*

Source (Primary)	Quote / Key Phrase	How it Supports the Argument
Fiji National Climate Change Policy (2018)	Links vulnerability assessment to adaptation funding priorities	Shows Pacific governments navigating aid conditionality while addressing local needs
Tuvalu National Adaptation Plan (2017)	Prioritises Loss and Damage finance in adaptation planning	Demonstrates contemporary funding logic replicating structural dependency on external actors
UNDP & PIF Reports (2022)	Conditional funding structures for climate adaptation projects	Highlights continued Northern influence on local decision-making and policy framing

The hoped-for era of autonomy following political independence did not materialize.

Our national leaders were in the vanguard of a rush to secure financial aid from every quarter; our economies were stagnating or declining; our environments were deteriorating or were threatened and we could do little about it; our own people were evacuating themselves to greener pastures elsewhere. Whatever remained of our resources, including our exclusive economic zones, was being hawked for the highest bid

Epeli Hau'ofa (1993)

In the post-independence era, Pacific Island states remained embedded in the periphery of a global capitalist scaffolding—an architecture constructed by colonial powers and webbed with external control and asymmetrical power relations—which continues to underpin donor-driven climate finance regimes (Futaiasi et al., 2023; Lea, 2000; Teaiwa et al., 2007). Complex bureaucratic processes, risk-averse funding models, and reliance on external intermediaries disadvantage locally driven initiatives, leaving Pacific nations structurally reliant on Global North actors and entrenched within a broader economic precariat (Table 67) (IMF, 2021; UNDP & PIF, 2022; ODI, 2023). Access to climate finance is often conditional, channelled through international financial institutions that tend to prioritise multinational corporations or donor

agendas over local priorities (Table 68) (World Bank & OECD, 2021; UNDP & PIF, 2022). As such, the very structures intended to build resilience perpetuate cycles of vulnerability and economic subordination, and delimit local acumen (Futaia et al., 2023; Bhavnani et al., 2019; Fagan & Munck, 2018; Bertram & Watters, 1984; Hezel, 1968; Abe et al., 2025).

Table 67. *Bureaucratic Barriers and Structural Reliance in Climate Finance*

Source (Primary)	Quote / Key Phrase	How it Supports the Argument
IMF Reports (2021)	“Funding models tend to favor risk-averse projects and external intermediaries”	Shows how bureaucratic processes disadvantage locally led initiatives
UNDP & PIF Reports (2022)	“Local proposals often require validation through international agencies before approval”	Demonstrates structural reliance on Global North actors
ODI Reports (2023)	“Pacific nations face complex application procedures that limit access to climate finance”	Highlights barriers reinforcing economic precarity and dependency

Table 68. *Conditionality and Northern Prioritisation in Climate Finance*

Source (Primary)	Quote / Key Phrase	How it Supports the Argument
World Bank Reports	“Funding prioritizes multinational corporations and donor-driven agendas over local needs”	Reveals Northern influence shaping priorities and marginalising local agency
OECD Reports	“International finance is channeled to align with donor objectives”	Demonstrates conditionality in climate finance, replicating historical extractive logic
UNDP & PIF Reports (2022)	“Access to finance is often contingent upon adherence to externally defined frameworks”	Shows continued structural control limiting autonomous Pacific-led initiatives

Yet, cyclically, such economic arrangements continue to discursively position the Pacific as dependent and reliant on external saviours (Table 69), incongruously furthering the Global North’s position as arbiters of development and climate resilience (Hau’ofa, 1993; Overton & Murray, 2011; Williams, 2000).

Table 69. *Discursive Reinforcement of Pacific Dependency*

Source (Primary)	Quote / Key Phrase	How it Supports the Argument
ODI Reports (2023)	“Aid-reliant states require ongoing donor oversight to manage development outcomes”	Reinforces Global North authority as arbiters of development
UNDP & PIF Communications	“Projects aim to build resilience in aid-recipient nations through externally managed programs”	Demonstrates how discursive framing positions Pacific nations as passive recipients
World Bank / IMF Country Reports	“Pacific Island states face structural vulnerabilities that necessitate international assistance”	Reproduces the narrative of dependency and justifies Northern intervention

In effect, the continuum of external intervention, from colonial extraction to modern climate finance and aid, producing slow, cumulative, and unevenly distributed violence that extend the colonial architecture of vulnerability into the present and foreseeable future (Nixon, 2013; Bhavnani et al., 2019; Futaiasi et al., 2023).

Saviourship operates as a mechanism of contemporary colonisation: the Global North exercises selective benevolence, intervening only when convenient, while perpetuating structural dependency, inequality, and systemic precarity (Hau‘ofa, 1993; Bordner, 2019; Escobar, 1995). As Bordner (2019) notes, “boats of aid replace boats of empire.” In climate discourse, these narratives constitute a modality of climate coloniality: Pacific peoples remain exposed to environmental and economic risks they did not create, while external actors retain both material benefits and moral authority. This framing underscores that vulnerability, once again, is neither natural nor neutral; it is produced, circulated, and maintained through historical and contemporary processes of domination, extraction, and selective care (Spivak, 1988; Chakrabarty, 2009; Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Quijano, 2000).

A rigorous interrogation of the epistemic and discursive constructions of vulnerability is thus imperative to foreground Pacific agency, contest prevailing hierarchies of knowledge, and articulate locally grounded, equitable approaches to climate adaptation and development.

7. Epilogue

This section draws on Pacific concepts rooted in Indigenous epistemologies, offering a lens through which to understand and navigate climate vulnerability. Rather than prescribing solutions, it presents a way of looking forward — attentive to the relational currents, historical forces, and lived narratives that shape how vulnerability is experienced, negotiated, and resisted across Pacific communities.

For too long, others have written our obituaries. The Pacific has been declared lost, dying, dependent, or drowning — yet we are still here, writing, working, living.

Vanessa Griffen (1987)

i. Climate Justice – Te Vaka

Te vaka – the canoe - carries all who are aboard; responsibility is shared, and navigation requires attention to currents and winds.

When addressing climate change in the Pacific, the question of justice — who is responsible, who suffers, and who decides what comes next — is inescapable, and addressing it requires a shared responsibility. The vaka itself embodies collective responsibility: it carries all aboard, reminding us that vulnerability and resilience are shared, and no one can be left behind.

Pacific nations contribute little to global emissions yet face some of the harshest consequences. Vulnerability must therefore be understood through the lens of climate justice: recognising uneven responsibility for environmental pressures and the exclusion of Pacific voices from decision-making, but also, confronting the power imbalances that traverse scales and structure the terrains of vulnerability itself (Roberts & Parks, 2007; Schlosberg, 2012).

In this sense, te vaka reminds us that climate justice is not only about addressing environmental threats; it is about recognising interconnectedness, shared responsibility, and the relational obligations we have to one another.

ii. Decolonisation: A Process, not an endpoint – Tauhi Vaka

To guide te vaka — tauhi vaka — is to navigate complex and shifting seas with care, foresight, and cooperation.

In this way, Decolonisation can be understood as tauhi vaka. It is not a fixed destination, a single event, or a symbolic milestone; rather, it is an ongoing process of careful navigation through social, political, and epistemic waters. Colonisation did not end with legal independence; it changed form, re-embedding itself in political structures, knowledge systems, and institutional norms (Coulthard, 2014; Alfred & Corntassel, 2005; Sanga & Thaman, 2009).

To tauhi vaka is to collectively steer, adjust, and read the currents – unsettling colonial logics and asserting Indigenous authority. This sustained effort transforms not only the course of the vaka but also the foundations upon which contemporary societies and institutions are built, ensuring they reflect Indigenous values, epistemologies, and leadership (Tuck & Yang, 2012; Simpson, 2017; Coulthard, 2014; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018).

iii. **Reconstructing Climate Vulnerability – Moana**

Te vaka e rere ana i te Moana – the canoe journeys across the ocean. ‘Moana’ is the ocean as relational and interconnected, symbolising flows, networks, and systemic complexity.

Climate vulnerability is like the Moana. To understand it, one must map not only the ocean’s cartography and geography, but also the intertwined currents of power, history, and human–environment relationships that carry and contour its flow.

Te vaka (climate justice), calls for tauhi vaka (decolonial approaches), but also listens to the moana; to acknowledge intersecting systems of oppression – across race, gender, class, colonial histories, and capitalist logics – that co-produce and sustain one another, fracturing relationships between people, the environment, and the extractive systems of colonialism and capitalism (Whyte, 2018; Gonzalez, 2021). To navigate this moana is to centre the ‘system’ as the root of the change needed and to recognise climate change as a symptom, rather than the problem itself.

In this moana, no community is untouched – and no solution can ignore these interconnected flows.

iv. **Reflective Considerations on Research Approach – Talanoa of the Vaka**

This section takes the form of talanoa – a space of dialogue and reflection.

As *talanoa* invites, this section is not about presenting a definitive answer but engaging in relational reflection: tracing how my work has engaged with colonial legacies, where it has fallen short, and considers how it might move towards more decolonial and Indigenous-centred practices.

This thesis engages with the colonial legacies that construct the narratives of vulnerability in the Pacific, interrogating their enduring structures and the historical, social, and political forces that sustain them, rather than centring Pasifika stories of vulnerability, resilience, and empowerment. As a storyteller and researcher outside Pasifika, I do not seek to tell the stories of others, but to learn, listen, and draw on my positionality and power to tell a story of my own making.

Climate justice is the te vaka – and I am part of this vaka. I carry the purpose of engaging with and challenging systemic inequalities. My thesis

contributes to the greater act of tauhi vaka, navigating the moana of climate vulnerability through the relational currents of its narratives.

Yet, the journey, even with a steadfast vaka, remains fraught and continuous.

I turn to Māori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2021) who demands decolonising research to not only recognise persistent colonial imprints but actively reshape research relationships in which Indigenous stories, priorities, knowledge, and authority are centred. While my approach interrogated colonial legacies, Smith offers another approach; the active transferring of power, platform and voice to the marginalised.

v. Indigenisation – Vanua and Mana Moana

Vanua is not only a physical place but a living foundation of identity, belonging, and responsibility - a concept that grounds knowledge in the inseparable relationship between land, people, culture, and spirit.

From talanoa, I turn to vanua. It is within this grounding that I begin to explore what it means to situate my research in relation to Indigenous place-based epistemologies. Indigenisation focuses on embedding vanua-informed knowledge, values, and practices into governance, education, and resource management (Sanga & Thaman, 2009; Koya Vaka'uta, 2016) - systems that were never designed to accommodate them in the first place (Pihama et al., 2002; Wilson, 2008; Thaman, 2003).

Just as the ocean connects islands, carries histories, and sustains life, it also symbolises the collective rising of Pacific peoples who resist reductive narratives of vulnerability. In this sense, empowerment is not about adopting external frameworks, but about reclaiming and amplifying the mana of Pacific communities, activists, and scholars who articulate futures grounded in sovereignty, justice, and cultural resurgence.

Mana Moana speaks to the Pacific as a site of strength, resurgence, and sovereignty.

Indigenisation is not merely the inclusion of vanua but about transformation - reshaping institutions so that Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing are positioned at the centre rather than the peripheral (Hoskins & Jones, 2022; Smith, 2021; Thaman, 2003).

The process of Indigenisation exists in parallel with, and is integral to, decolonisation (Macfarlane et al., 2015; Smith, 2021; Alfred & Corntassel, 2005).

In the Pacific, this means recognising the resistance led by Indigenous communities, activists, and scholars who reject narratives of helplessness and articulate futures grounded in sovereignty and self-determination. As Lutunatabua and the Pacific Climate Warriors remind us, Pacific peoples are

“not drowning, we are fighting” — a powerful assertion of agency that positions frontline communities as central to the struggle for climate justice (Pacific Climate Warriors, 2019; Lutunatabua, 2021).

vi. Reimagining Climate Futures: Hope and Transformation - Vivir Bien

These stories underscore the need to move beyond reductive generalisations or Western-imposed imaginaries of ‘vulnerability’. To truly understand the climate crisis, we must centre the lived experiences and historical contexts of Pacific Island nations. Ultimately, the Global South must have the power to rewrite the narrative — and the North must finally learn to listen. Here, I call for a narratively reversal.

8. Conclusion

This thesis has shown that climate vulnerability in the Pacific is not only material but deeply discursive. Narratives—about who is vulnerable, who is at risk, and who acts—shape how communities are perceived and how interventions are designed. Colonial histories and contemporary power structures continue to control these stories, framing Pacific peoples as passive, dependent, or in need of saving, even when these are our own lived experiences. Such narratives naturalise inequities, reinforce dependency, and obscure local agency, embedding structural harms within seemingly protective measures.

Yet these stories are also sites of resistance. Centring Pacific voices and reclaiming our narratives is essential for disrupting the legacies of colonial control and building climate governance that is just, equitable, and grounded in our own knowledge, priorities, and resilience.

This thesis has also reflected on how knowledge itself is produced. Western approaches to argument and evidence often move backward, seeking causal explanations or justifications for external interventions—mapping how saviourship narratives are constructed and rationalised. In contrast, an Indigenous approach follows the forward, lived, and relational path of the narrative, allowing stories to unfold on their own terms, revealing priorities, agency, and meaning as they arise. By privileging this forward-looking perspective, I show how dominant discourses—while appearing neutral or inevitable—reproduce neocolonial structures, embedding dependency and external control. Centring Indigenous narratives challenges Western logics of justification and emphasises the power of storytelling to shape futures rather than simply explain the past.

Finally, I acknowledge that this thesis is written within Western academic frameworks, yet knowledge is not only built through analysis but through the stories we tell. In the Pacific, storytelling is more than narrative—it is a way of life, a vessel for passing wisdom across generations. Knowledge resides in the words spoken between elders and children, in the tales of land and sea, and in oral histories embedded in our communities. By listening, researching, and writing, I aim to honour these stories and those who carry them. Though colonial powers carved this ocean into laws and boundaries, the original stories endure, reminding us that the ocean—and its knowledge—was always mapped by those who knew its rhythms, not its borders. The voyage is ongoing, carrying both the weight of oppression and the infinite horizon of possibility.

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