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Colonial fantasies of invulnerability to climate change

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ABSTRACT

Despite an ever-growing critical literature, vulnerability retains its place as a dominant concept in climate politics. What is less heavily researched is the concept of “invulnerability,” an idea that feminist and decolonial theory has many tools to critique. After unpacking the material and discursive elements of vulnerability politics, this article focuses on invulnerability as a concept that is an influential yet unexplored set of masculine and colonial fantasies. These fantasies – of modernity, mastery, and continentalism – are critiqued through different critical traditions, which are brought into conversation with climate politics literature. I then discuss the counternarratives of Oceanic thought, following Teresia Teaiwa’s prompt to “island the world.” I argue that this can be done through a focus on care, relationality, and a decolonial politics of resistance. I conclude that resisting the politics of vulnerability requires an engagement with critical feminist and decolonial thought to enable an imaginative piercing of the fantasies of invulnerability.

KEYWORDS Vulnerability; invulnerability; fantasies; coloniality; Oceania



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Introduction

This is coal, don’t be afraid! Don’t be scared! ... There’s no word for coalophobia officially Mr Speaker, but that’s the malady that afflicts those opposite. (Scott Morrison in *Guardian* 2017)

[R]ecognizing the anxieties created by vulnerability is the first step in revealing its capacity to disrupt, un-work, and reorder dominant rationales of global governance. (Lisle 2016, 427)

[T]here is a need for a new vision that re-unites human beings with all of their relations in the world, and that vision is necessary to sustain a very difficult struggle. We must recognize that the world is a limited space but that our imaginations, our mental universe, is infinite. We must understand that the

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ultimate freedom is freedom from want, the ultimate security is sharing, the ultimate power is, simply, *aloha*.¹ (Osorio 2011, 300)

The concept of climate change vulnerability is heavily researched across disciplines and is important to both United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) processes. What is less heavily researched is the concept of invulnerability. Climate change is both a material and a discursive phenomenon (Farbotko and Lazrus 2012, 382), and both vulnerability and invulnerability contain within them a material and discursive politics. The materiality of vulnerability is studied in the IPCC reports, and it is wielded discursively by a range of actors across activist and diplomatic sites. In this research, “resilience” is the term that is used as vulnerability’s material opposite, while “invulnerability” is a term that is largely avoided (Barry 2012; Weatherill 2024). However, in this article I eschew “resilience,” a term that is embroiled in neoliberal ideas of coping with harm rather than preventing it (Amo-Agyemang 2021; Bracke 2016; Mourad 2020). Instead, I draw on critical feminist theory that identifies the notion of invulnerability as a fantasy (Butler 2004; Gilson 2011), a fiction (Abadía 2020), or a delusion (Barry 2012). In doing so, I highlight how the idea of being impervious to climate harm is itself a vulnerabilizing fantasy, based on overlapping colonial and masculinist rejections of vulnerability.

Climate denialism has now continued past the point of material interest, and past the point where the “the affluence-as-shield narrative” can hold up scientifically (Jackson 2024, 1099). Wealthy states are experiencing climate-related disasters such as floods, fires, and extreme weather events, and yet they continue to subsidize fossil fuels. Globally, fossil fuel subsidies rose to a record \$7 trillion USD in 2022 (Black, Parry, and Vernon-Lin 2023). Explaining this on the level of the material is difficult. In this article, I instead argue that much of the reason for the lack of action on climate change is because vulnerability is discursively constructed as a racialized and feminized characteristic. This characteristic is assumed to apply to the people and places where risk and danger is already geographically imagined to be (Bankoff 2001; Weatherill 2023). It is the feminized, racialized Other who is vulnerable, not the masculine, rational white male subject. This applies to both people and the imaginative construction of states themselves. Climate change is therefore being folded into existing politics and policy such as development, rather than being seen as requiring a new approach. Indeed, the threat of a new politics is arguably entrenching denialism in the form of a racialized, protective, or petro-masculinity (Daggett 2018; Perry 2024).

The quotes with which this article begins summarize how my argument that fear and fantasy are important for understanding climate change (in)action unfolds. First is the infamous moment in the Australian House of

Representatives when Scott Morrison used coal as a prop to mock the Opposition, reducing fossil fuel emissions and the violence of climate change to the physical object of a piece of coal, wielded as an absurd object of fear (*Guardian* 2017). This moment is a perfect demonstration of the masculinity of the fantasies of invulnerability. In his writing, Pacific author Jonathan Kay Kamakawiwo'ole Osorio (2011) offers an alternative vision of human struggle, one that is relational and solidaristic. Debbie Lisle (2016) links these two threads together, showing how this vision of a new world represents the loss of power and status for some, leading to this masculine posturing. This article therefore unpacks this masculine, colonial notion of invulnerability in order to make it more readily visible, and therefore more readily challenged and imagined otherwise.

In this article, I argue that vulnerability is a key concept in the struggle for a decolonized future and a habitable world. I start by arguing that there are two understandings of vulnerability that operate in climate politics. Disentangling the two enables a more detailed understanding of the political implications of vulnerability research. I then discuss three climate fantasies of invulnerability that further uncover the coloniality of the concept. The final section argues that an engagement with Oceanic literature can provide counternarratives that work to overcome these fantasies. I conclude by arguing that rather than upholding fantasies of invulnerability, vulnerability needs to be reimagined and accepted as a shared condition. This shift would strengthen the argument for climate action and enable a future with a liveable earth.

Vulnerabilities

I begin by differentiating between two understandings of vulnerability that are often conflated. Making these differences clear helps to make better sense of vulnerability's contradictions, and the ways in which the concept reinforces colonial logics (Weatherill 2024).

First, vulnerability is understood in climate politics as a scientific positivist and individually measurable phenomenon. This conceptualization of vulnerability enables a methodological project that works through interventions in the IPCC and other formal documents for the purpose of ranking vulnerability across states. This ranking is necessitated by the UNFCCC's Article 4, which requires that Annex II Parties assist "the developing country Parties that are particularly vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change in meeting costs of adaptation to those adverse effects" (UNFCCC 1992). Vulnerability is also mentioned 12 times in the Paris Agreement, and its link with adaptation is reinforced, especially in Articles 6, 7, and 11 (UNFCCC 2015). While these Articles address different areas, the point is still that vulnerability needs to be identified so that adaptation resources can be directed to "particularly vulnerable" developing country Parties. Vulnerability is also

sometimes related to Article 2, which addresses mitigation, where greenhouse gas concentrations are to be stabilized “at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system” (UNFCCC 1992). Vulnerability is therefore a mechanism through which “dangerous” levels can be judged. However, the mitigation implications of vulnerability are perpetually sidelined in these conversations, meaning that vulnerability has largely become an adaptation concept (Mikulewicz 2018).

Second, climate vulnerability is part of a broader discursive landscape (Feindt and Oels 2005, 162) of imaginative geographies of risk. As climate change emerged as a discourse, vulnerability was mostly discussed in relation to sea level rise and socio-economic status. This meant that least developed countries and small island developing states were quickly identified as most vulnerable to climate change, tying climate politics into the politics of development. While the positivist project of indexing has changed and developed, this underlying imaginative geography of where is safe and where is vulnerable has endured in the wider discourse of climate vulnerability. This discursive vulnerability is related to and reliant on colonial geographic imaginations and assumptions about risk and danger (Bankoff 2001). In this imagined space, the Pacific Islands became synonymous with vulnerability (Weatherill 2023).

It is through the work of decolonial feminists and scholars of Oceania – the place most often “Othered” as most vulnerable – that questions can be asked about both the discursive and scientific conceptualizations of vulnerability. Decolonial feminism is a critical feminism that actively rejects the white imperialist project of which liberal or “civilisational” feminism has historically been part (Vergès 2021, 4). Through this rejection, decolonial feminism’s objective is “the destruction of racism, capitalism, and imperialism” (Vergès 2021, 5). Pursuit of this goal requires a fundamental re-evaluation of embedded understandings and narratives of climate change in order to recognize that “climate change is not an isolated environmental or natural crisis, but a complex web of colonial legacies, capitalist exploitation, and intersectional gender and racial injustices that are interconnected with accelerating economic growth” (Resurrección 2024).

A decolonial feminism is also not only concerned with “women,” but also acting in solidarity with the struggles of the majority world where people are exerting their right to existence (Vergès 2021, 10). It argues that the most encouraging and original practices, experiences, and theories are being articulated from the Global South, through movements that are making links between gendered violence and “the fight against policies of dispossession, colonization, extractivism, and the systematic destruction of the living” (Vergès 2021, 11). Notably, these movements are not new; on the contrary, there is a long history of women-led struggle: “Indigenous women during colonization, enslaved women, Black women, women involved in the struggles for national liberation and the feminist subaltern internationalism

of the 1950s–1970s, and racialized women who struggle daily even today” (Vergès 2021, 11).

Decolonial work in the Pacific also has a long history, through the independence struggles of the twentieth century, some of which necessarily continue to the present day (Banivanua-Mar 2016; Stratford et al. 2023; Swan 2022; Teaiwa 2020b). These struggles are anti-nuclear as well as anti-imperial, as in the Pacific the issues and politics are entwined (Hogue and Maurer 2022; Maurer 2024). It is important to note that contemporary decolonial struggles in the Pacific are not only against neocolonialism and coloniality, but also for the “principles of Indigenous self-determination and repatriation of Indigenous land” (McDonnell and Regenvanu 2022, 235). This means that while I am interested in counternarratives that are told of climate change and vulnerability, I also agree with those who remind us that decolonization is not a metaphor (Bhambra and Newell 2022; Tuck and Yang 2012). What is most important here is to return continuously to the decolonial feminist work from the Pacific Islands that I have identified as resisting vulnerability. If both of the dominant iterations of vulnerability are reproducing coloniality, then it is through decolonial work that vulnerability can be fully understood and potentially even reconceptualized in ways that escape this trap.

Fantasies of invulnerability

In this article, I identify three fantasies of invulnerability that structure climate politics: the fantasy of modernity, the fantasy of mastery, and the fantasy of continentalism (Weatherill 2024). As noted above, other scholars have referred to “fictions” and “delusions” of invulnerability, but I use “fantasies” following Judith Butler, whose work on vulnerability is fundamental to my argument. By drawing attention to vulnerabilization, Butler’s work is able to show how vulnerability is simultaneously a materially produced condition and a discourse that can be wielded to justify victimizing and paternalistic politics (Butler 2016). In the same way, I am arguing that while some invulnerability can be produced through wealth and adaptation, invulnerability is also a set of discursive fantasies that are wielded to justify the continued politics of colonial violence and domination that is driving climate change.

The three fantasies that I identify in this article are all “First Worldisms” (Butler 2004). These fantasies uphold the “First World” as a place that is defined through its invulnerability, held in binary opposition to the “Third World,” which is definitively vulnerable. According to Butler, moments that rupture this “First World complacency” could elicit two responses: they could enable a reflection on the radically unequal global distribution of vulnerability, or they could elicit fear, and acts that seek to restore the invulnerability, such as consolidating military power (Butler 2002, 60). This latter reaction is violent and masculine, and the choice that we have seen made

so far in the twenty-first century, such as the response of the United States (US) to the confrontation of vulnerability that was the September 11 attacks. It is also a choice being made in a climate-changing world, as reflected in the theories of climate and eco-apartheid (Heron 2024; Rice, Long, and Levenda 2022).

“First World” fantasies, then, are militaristic, masculine, and violent. As Carol Cohn highlights, the vulnerability that is guarded against by militarism is not that of the human, which is invisibilized, but that of the state and its weapons (Cohn 2014, 52). Yet there is also an assumed invulnerable subject: that of the masculine, Western Man (Weatherill 2024, 672). This figure is of the “original man,” for whom there is no dependency or inter-dependency, on nature or on others:

[H]e is somehow, and from the start, always and already upright, capable, without ever having been supported by others, without having held onto another’s body in order to steady himself, without ever having been fed when he could not feed himself, without ever having been wrapped in a blanket for warmth by someone else. He sprang, lucky guy, from the imaginations of liberal theorists as a full adult, without relations, but equipped with anger and desire, sometimes capable of a happiness or self-sufficiency that depended on a natural world preemptively void of other people. (Butler 2020, 34)

This natural world “void of other people” shows that this rejection of (inter)dependence is not only masculine but also colonial. The fantasies that I draw out below all reproduce this masculine, colonial fear of vulnerability in different ways.

The fantasy of modernity

The fantasy of modernity is familiar to critical theory, and critiqued through concepts such as decoloniality (Mignolo 2005) and racial capitalism (Bhattacharyya 2018). The fantasy is that there is a universal and linear development path that leads to becoming European, and therefore safe.² This fantasy obscures the modernity–coloniality relationship, where “the achievements of modernity go hand in hand with the violence of coloniality” (Mignolo 2005, 5). Gargi Bhattacharyya’s metaphor of a house with many stories shows how movement within the house, and access to the comforts of the living room, is delimited by its “strange geography” (Bhattacharyya 2018, 1). Modernity suggests that everyone will get into the living room eventually, but its critics show how

much of the world has never and will never enter that particular form of living room comfort and that this exclusion or expulsion is no accident. The integrity of the building demands that different groups remain in their separate wings and such differentiations are important for the maintenance of the building and its lovely main living room. (Bhattacharyya 2018, 1)

This shows us that there is no universal modernity to be achieved through an economic system of racial capitalism, where the comfort of modernity is only achievable through exploitation and marginalization. It cannot be replicated by those who are disadvantaged by the legacies of colonial violence and the “Othering” of the modernity rhetoric.

This rhetoric is important for upholding the system, as “the rhetoric of modernity and the logic of coloniality [are] constitutive of two heads from the same body” (Mignolo 2011, 49). While I am using the term “fantasy,” Bhattacharyya calls this rhetoric “fairy tales,” where the promise of achieving modernity is wielded to justify the system, with “the promise to civilise through capitalism, that is, to ascend to the status of recognised economic actor in the market, because it is recognition in the economic sphere that signals inclusion as human” (Bhattacharyya 2018, 73). Walter D. Mignolo discusses the conglomeration of people and territory, where colonial racism affects people and region together (Mignolo 2009). It is these categorizations that form the borders of the fantasy. In the fantasy of modernity, there are the people who can develop land, and the people who are land.

This fantasy is present in the climate change literature. It is found in arguments that vulnerability is a condition of not being sufficiently developed and that development leads to invulnerability. Arturo Escobar calls development a “mutation of modernity” (Escobar 1995, 11). The discourse of development still uses the language of modernity, with a linear path to follow that leads to development, as the new word for “civilization,” with the same logics of racialization. The coloniality therefore remains in the argument that development is a possible pathway to be replicated without following the European model of colonialism. What this fantasy denies is that any invulnerability achieved through development is only a partial safety, and only achievable through extractivism, even in its “green” forms (Dunlap and Marin 2022). This fantasy requires a denial of the effects of climate change that are being felt in the “invulnerable,” developed world, and reduces climate action to a question of “supporting” developing, vulnerable countries.

This fantasy therefore leads to a politics in which life is valued or not according to racialized “gradations of disposability” (Perry 2023, 172) – disposable lives being those that are superfluous to the advancement of modernity, capitalism (Yates 2011), or neoliberalism (Bhagat 2020). The rhetoric of rationalism and practicality relies on the advancement of modernity and the logic of the market to “solve” climate change. The existence of the vulnerable Other only reinforces the need for a continuation of vulnerabilizing development policies. To take an example from the IPCC, vulnerability is broken down in the *Fifth Assessment Report* (AR5) into “environmental vulnerability” and “institutional vulnerability,” the latter “refer[ring], among other issues, to the role of governance” (IPCC 2014, 1068). Environmental vulnerability is said to affect rural populations in particular due to their reliance

on “ecosystem services,” and is increasing due to extreme weather events coupled with bad land management and degradation (IPCC 2014, 1068). Institutional vulnerability is increasing in places with failed governance, as “[g]overnance is increasingly recognized as a key factor that influences vulnerability and adaptive capacity of societies and communities exposed to extreme events and gradual climate change” (IPCC 2014, 1068). Somalia, Ethiopia, Haiti, and Afghanistan are therefore listed in this section as the most vulnerable states, and the Failed State Index and Corruption Perception Index are both named as characterizing both institutional vulnerability and governance failure (IPCC 2014, 1068).

In this framing, bad land management and corruption become vulnerability characteristics. It is therefore rural populations and states such as Haiti and Afghanistan that are at fault and need to change. Failure to adapt to extreme events and the effects of climate change is the fault of the insufficiently modernized rural worker. Similarly, it is the corrupt, usually postcolonial, state that is failing on its path toward becoming an invulnerable, modern state. There is no sense of history in the fantasy of modernity, or of relationality, with each state’s vulnerability a reflection of its position on various indices. The vulnerable, insufficiently modern state is disposable as it lacks a place in the future modern world, and therefore its predicted suffering elicits no preventative action.

The fantasy of mastery

The fantasy of mastery is related to modernity and is also familiar to critical theory, in particular (eco-)feminism (Alaimo 2009; Plumwood 1994). This fantasy relies on assumptions that technology can overcome any obstacle to achieving perpetual domination over “nature,” which is always held as Other. The “modern self” is built on the separation and superiority of humans from nature, where “humans” means Western Man, and “nature” includes women and racialized peoples (Barca 2020, 4). This domination narrative is of linear progress, and “human history ... a process of continuous improvement” (Head 2016, 5). The coloniality of this fantasy lies in this contrast between Man and nature, which is a subordinate to be mastered. The conflation of people and place that makes some people part of nature shows how this is a colonial category too. It is the exclusion from the category of modern, and the line between dominant and dominated:

To be defined as “nature” in this context is to be defined as passive, as non-agent and non-subject, as the “environment” or invisible background conditions against which the “foreground” achievements of reason or culture (provided typically by the white, western, male expert or entrepreneur) take place. (Plumwood 1994, 4)

Invulnerability can therefore be created, according to this fantasy, through overcoming the reliance on a liveable environment and non-renewable resources. The fantasy is that technology, wealth, masculinity, and whiteness can defeat the human reliance on a liveable earth. What is denied is planetary limits on expansion and growth, as well as practical limits on technologies that do not yet exist but that are still relied on in climate models.

This fantasy is present in the climate change literature. It works against arguments for mitigation, assuming that technologies such as carbon capture can overcome the need for the levels of carbon reduction that would require societal change. Some have shown how these assumptions are depoliticized and technocratic (Malm and Carton 2021). I am expanding this argument to say that they are also a form of coloniality. The fantasy is not only that solutions will be found in the realm of the rational, but also that life can carry on as-is for the high-consuming people of the Global North, through the fantasy of carbon offsetting (Watt 2021) or the “green economy spectacle” (Bracking 2015). Stacy Alaimo (2009) shows how climate change is wrapped up in notions of masculinity, both with the “hegemonic masculinity of aggressive consumption, as well as transcendent scientific visions” (Alaimo 2009, 26). The fantasy of mastery relies on an imaginary of strength, impenetrability, and mastery over nature (see also Daggett 2018).

This fantasy of mastery is also a mechanism of coloniality, as it masks the temporality of sacrifice. Now that the mines of Banaba and Nauru are closed,³ phosphate scarcity is coming to be understood as a global crisis for food production, with “rising alarm over the perceived limits of phosphorus for life on earth” (Teaiwa 2014, 36). However, the entire literature on this current global “problem” ignores both Banaba and Nauru, simultaneously avoiding any discussion of the ethical and environmental dilemmas that come with the sort of extractive mining that phosphate requires (Teaiwa 2014, 36). The reassurances that technology will enable access to deep-sea mining reserves of the Earth’s crust pay no attention to the damage to life that this mining will do, including, again, to the Pacific. The language of “the good of mankind” and the fantasy of mastery over planetary limits cannot conceive of a price that is too high for the perpetuation of capitalism.

The fantasy of continentalism

The final fantasy of invulnerability that is of interest here is the fantasy of continentalism. I identify this fantasy through an engagement with Teresia Teaiwa’s provocation to “island” the world:

Let us “island” the world! Let us teach the inhabitants of planet Earth how to behave as if we were all living on islands! For what is Earth but an island in our solar system? An island of precious ecosystems and finite resources. Finite resources. Limited space. The islanded must understand that to live

long and well, they need to take care. Care for other humans, care for plants, animals; care for soil, care for water. *Once islanded humans are awakened from the stupor of continental fantasies*. The islanded can choose to understand there is nothing but more islands to look forward to. Continents do not exist, metaphysically speaking. It is islands all the way up, islands all the way down. Islands to the right of us, islands to the left. (Teaiwa 2007, 514, emphasis added)

This fantasy relies on a colonial Othering of islands. It is a racialized fantasy, where the vulnerable island is tropical, small and uninhabitable, and populated by savages. Tracy Banivanua-Mar talks of Melanesia, a region of the Pacific racialized as Black, as a colonial frontier, “an epistemically murky and liminal site, a ‘space of death’” (Banivanua-Mar 2007, 21). The state of exception was active in this region during the nineteenth century due to its imagined illegitimacy, an Othering with terrible violent effect, justifying the British colonial interests in the area as they “gained their moral imperative and sanction through that Melanesianism, or the Pacific’s own Orientalism” (Banivanua-Mar 2007, 22). Other research has shown the Othering that enabled the illegitimation of island lives and cultures across the global ocean. All of this relies on the fantasy of continentalism, and a fear of and obsession with ocean as a vast and empty space, “as an anthropocentric and colonial ‘aqua nullius,’ or a blank space across which a diasporic masculinity might be forged” (DeLoughrey 2019, 22).

At the same time, as Sasha Davis explains, islands are the epitome of the modernist, masculine idea of self-sufficient, independent man, and therefore also the proof of the falsity of the myth:

What makes geographical islands the deathbed of modernist thinking ... is that showing that island environments are in fact deeply interconnected and relational shreds the ontological possibility of disconnection anywhere because it is not even true in the places that many still believe are emblematic of that possibility. Simply put, if even (geographic) islands aren’t really (conceptual) islands, then nowhere is. Islands are where modernist logics make their last stand. The modernist world seems to end because island lives and environments, with their constant modulation within global flows, never seem to end. (Davis 2021, 417)

The fantasy of continentalism is therefore also deeply reliant on the fantasies of modernity and mastery over nature. This fantasy rests on an imagined binary of continents of endless space and resources, to be conquered and settled according to imperial logics of manifest destiny and frontierism, versus islands that are not real places of habitation, only sources of resources or strategic outposts for military bases. The fantasy is particularly visible in the case of the United Kingdom (UK), an island(s) state itself yet an imagined global continent, where its language and “overseas territories” spread across the world in a legacy of empire (Colley 2003).

Climate change politics reproduces the fantasy of continentalism in its racialized assumptions about island vulnerability and continental invulnerability. The idea that islands are the epitome of vulnerability to climate change denies that continents also have coastlines, and also lie in the path of extreme weather events such as hurricanes. The categories of the IPCC have long kept these categories separate, though the *Sixth Assessment Report* (AR6) included the low-lying states of the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) in their “Small Islands” chapter for the first time (IPCC 2023, 2048). Making climate change a problem either for inherently unsafe environments such as islands, or for particularly undeveloped, war-torn, or unviable states means that climate change vulnerability remains a condition of the Other, with the safety of the imagined continents of Europe and North America protected by the strength of their imagined borders. The fantasy of the limitless space and resources of these continents denies the vast amount of material that has been extracted from other places in order to uphold the fantasy.

Furthermore, the islands of Aotearoa, Iceland, the UK, Tasmania, and Ireland have all been reported to be “the places best suited to survive a global collapse of society” (Carrington 2021). The imagined “most vulnerable” and “most invulnerable” places on the planet are islands. This now plays out in the politics of refuge, with successive UK governments working to create a hostile environment to migrants, a securitized response that Kimberley Anh Thomas and Benjamin P. Warner (2019) call “elite fortification.” Colonial dynamics are also being exacerbated on identified “safe islands,” with occupied land on the South Island of Aotearoa and Hawai’i being bought up by billionaires looking for a safe haven from the consequences of their actions (Bollmer, Guinness, and Doig 2024). With all of this in mind, the racialization of this fantasy becomes exceptionally clear.

These fantasies show that the politics of climate change vulnerability is paternalistic and developmental, building on a conceptualization of vulnerability that is both racialized and gendered, and grounded in historical, colonial imaginative geographies. These fantasies diminish the importance of climate action and mitigation in particular. In the next section, I discuss Oceanic resistance. Recognizing the resistance of islanders to vulnerability is not commonplace in the literature or in media representations of the Pacific Islands. The story there continues to be that of the sinking island states – a story with the added “tragic” element of their innocence, their small contributions to greenhouse gas emissions making them the perfect climate victims. This story does not focus on resistance, as it requires islander victimhood (Farbotko 2010). Therefore, Oceanic resistance is also theoretically important to reconceptualizing vulnerability in a way that does not reproduce the colonial and developmental politics of the current conceptualization.

Islanding vulnerability through Oceanic resistance

In opposition to the fantasies of invulnerability, I argue for following Teresia Teaiwa's prompt in the passage above and "islanding" vulnerability. I argue that this can be done through a focus on care and relationality as espoused by Oceanic thought, which also resists the politics of vulnerability through an imaginative piercing of the fantasies of invulnerability. The work of Pacific scholars around the term "Oceania" has been a refusal of the "stingy colonial-imagined Pacific, with its focus on isolation and smallness" (Te Punga Somerville 2017, 26). Albert Wendt and Epeli Hau'ofa began the reimagining of "Oceania" in their work (Hau'ofa 1993; Wendt 1982), and the term now serves to represent this "Indigenous-imagined (although not Indigenous-exclusive) Oceania ... [which] looks totally different when one doesn't equate land with presence and water with absence" (Te Punga Somerville 2017, 26). Oceanic thought works to form decolonial solidarities in the region, forging coalitions across the ocean in ways that are inspired by Hau'ofa, and building a "pan-Pacific regionalism" or a "Blue Pacific" imaginary, "built and upheld by solidarity and consensus between Pacific peoples in resistance to colonial extractivism of the Pacific" (Mangioni 2021).

Against the fantasy of modernity, islanding can propose other ways of viewing development. In "Modern Life, Primitive Thoughts," Teresia Teaiwa discusses the unsustainable double bind for women of color scholars, which she relates to unsustainable living more broadly and also the myth of the Pacific paradise (Teaiwa 2011). This unsustainability is a lack of care that comes from striving for the unattainable fantasy of modernity. She writes that in fact unsustainability outlasts all else:

It remakes itself after the revolution. It is sustainable. It sustains itself. We are its collateral damage. Stress, anxiety, depression, hyper-tension, domestic violence, state violence, corruption, substance abuse, poverty, animal abuse, environmental degradation ... these are just some of the effects of the double bind. And they do not cease. This is why we need the myth of (the Pacific Island) paradise, right? (Teaiwa 2011, 178–179)

These reflections show that a feminist approach to "sustainability" and a liveable future is needed to break this cycle. Teresia Teaiwa argues against the reproduction of an approach to life that has this toll of collateral damage, the recurring theme of late capitalism: "'We will exploit every available resource that exists to improve life on this planet' vs 'Exploiting every available resource that exists is calamitous to life on this planet'" (Teaiwa 2011, 178).

Breaking this self-sustaining unsustainable cycle is a challenge to which Oceanic thought is particularly suited. Spiraling ideas of time and space can work against the linearity that underlies modernity's drudgery, though, as Teresia Teaiwa describes, the promise has its attraction:

The dream is to work, work, work so that we can have lives that are close to the ones we think white people have; not hippies, because hippies are too much like our ancestors. (We are also capable of linear evolutionist thinking!) Proper middle-class white people. That's who we aspire to be like. (Teaiwa 2011, 178)

Banishing “linear evolutionist thinking” and the dream of modernity opens up the possibility of alternative futures. Spiraling back to climate politics, viewing vulnerability from a position of care and humanity means demanding significant emission reductions, an end to the mass consumption of the wealthy, and reparations for damage already done. This can be a demand for loss and damage funds that do not exacerbate debt burdens (Lai et al. 2022) or for reparations (Perry 2021). The themes of shared humanity, mutual vulnerability, and care for future generations are repeated in the speeches of island diplomats, and in documents such as the *Suva Declaration* (Pacific Islands Development Forum Secretariat 2015). These themes and arguments are there to be found and cited.

From the position of researchers, journalists, and activists in the “invulnerable” developed states, islanding vulnerability means amplifying the decolonial voices of Oceania without framing the research or story within an extinction narrative. It means employing a feminist argument of care and shared humanity that does not require the “sinking islands” story to instill fear, but instead stresses that there is no invulnerability to climate change. It means arguing for changing course and prioritizing actual mitigation and reparations. It is an argument for a sustainable future without a reproduction of modernity’s drudgery that requires and creates vulnerability and an unlivable planet. It is an argument for decolonial, anti-capitalist feminism.

Against the fantasy of mastery, islanding can propose another way of viewing relations. For example, the Blue Pacific discourse is one that Katerina Teaiwa describes as an official discourse and policy that acts as a reframing of Oceania

in direct resistance to Pacific Rim and geopolitical framings of the islands as the “South Pacific,” “Indo-Pacific,” or “Asia-Pacific.” The Blue Pacific concept, now consistently used by the premier political regional body, the Pacific Islands Forum, is about the small Pacific Islands across a significantly large oceanic continent united in one voice in response to the demographically and economically larger and politically more powerful nation-states around the Rim. (Teaiwa 2020b, 602)

This discourse is rooted in imagining a different relationship to ocean, but it is also one that is used strategically by Pacific actors. This is of particular importance in a region that has been repeatedly treated as disposable for “the good of mankind” (Jetñil-Kijiner 2017, 21). The discourse of the Blue Pacific is therefore about providing a counternarrative to the fantasies of invulnerability – one that demands an end to exploitative and oppressive coloniality but

also stresses the humanity of Pacific Islanders. The “Large Ocean States” category that is used in opposition to the “Small Island Developing States” category makes the same move, countering the disempowering connotations of smallness with a narrative that relies on the hugeness of the ocean (Chan 2018).

However, the Blue Pacific discourse also draws on Oceanic ontologies. Politically, Oceania is positioned as a “dynamic Indigenous-centred, endlessly decolonizing space. In Oceania, the ancestral, traditional, and historical are not only things of the past, nor are they romantically held up as vestiges of lost cultural purity” (Te Punga Somerville 2017, 26). The Oceanic worldview is therefore based on care and relationality: “The Hawaiian/Oceanian worldview does not just celebrate harmony, it creates and re-creates it endlessly through webs of obligations and a profound sense of respect for *kūpuna*, for reverence, for sharing, for limits, and for our duty to family” (Osorio 2011, 299). Osorio begins to sketch out this idea through an Oceanic approach to viewing humanity as existing in webs of interdependencies. The understanding of humans that comes from modernist thinking is individualistic even when discussing justice through the vocabulary of inclusion and access:

This kind of vocabulary presumes, I think, that the resources of the world can never be assumed to be shared – that purposeful actions like laws and policies must be devised in order to make certain some kind of sharing takes place. (Osorio 2011, 299)

Human interactions are therefore interactional rather than relational: “We need each other in the sense that a product needs a buyer and, increasingly, a marketable product can be just about anything” (Osorio 2011, 299).

Osorio is not arguing for the existence of a “pristine Islander identity” that rises above “the bright and fascinating toys that modern society produces” (Osorio 2011, 299), but instead that the waves of violence in the Pacific in combination with Oceanic concepts such as *mana*, *pono*, and *kuleana*⁴ (Osorio 2011, 299) create a unique position of both critique and alternative imaginaries. From Oceania, which has suffered the effects of “runaway capitalism ... the logical result of missionaries, pork and sandalwood traders, whalers, sugar and cotton plantations – all of these old and oppressive exploitations, now transformed into tourist destinations and military bases” (Osorio 2011, 300), the cost of the wealth of the US can be seen and understood to be an impossible shared condition: “[W]e know that the whole world cannot live like Americans” (Osorio 2011, 300). Taking seriously the need for a new approach, seeing the violence of the Western approach to the human, Oceanic thought also offers an alternative. Osorio concludes with the passage that started this article:

[T]here is a need for a new vision that re-unites human beings with all of their relations in the world, and that vision is necessary to sustain a very difficult struggle. We must recognize that the world is a limited space but that our imaginations, our mental universe, is infinite. We must understand that the ultimate freedom is freedom from want, the ultimate security is sharing, the ultimate power is, simply, *aloha*. (Osorio 2011, 300)

Opposing continental, colonial imaginaries also means opposing the “runaway capitalism” that has caused so much damage. Katerina Teaiwa suggests that moving toward a safe, clean, and fair future requires

paying serious attention to the blue parts of our planet. If the Earth can be imagined as a body, the Pacific Ocean is a major organ like the lungs, and we all need our lungs to breathe and survive. What we do to the oceans, and to the islands, we do to all of us. (Teaiwa 2020a, 18:25–19:08)

This resonates with activists who have repeatedly argued that, rather than being the climate vulnerable, they are Pacific Climate Warriors who are not drowning but fighting (Packard 2013). Climate change, vulnerability, and the ocean all point to the interconnectivity of life, but also to the interconnectivity of destruction. Sacrificing a “major organ” like the ocean or the islands that lay within it for the sake of accessing more oil or more resources should therefore be understood as an act of colonial plunder that will be felt globally.

Finally, against the fantasy of continentalism, islanding can propose another way of viewing islands themselves: as nodes within global solidarities. An islanded vulnerability is a decolonial concept that centers solidarity, formed around shared experiences of coloniality and the environmental and life-destroying effects of capitalism. These solidarities in Oceania are Oceanic, but there is also a history of Black internationalist anti-colonial solidarity between “Melanesia” and Aboriginal activists in particular (Swan 2022). These movements have also long sought environmental justice. In the Pacific, the destruction of the environment is not a separate issue, or a new issue, but the same issue of fighting for full control and sovereignty of land that has been stolen twice over, through colonial claiming and capitalist exploitation. Climate activists from Oceania are becoming well known through their online presence and activism at Conferences of the Parties (COPs), but this international work is not new. In the twentieth century, Oceanic activists traveled widely to raise awareness of their own struggles, and learn from the Black movements in the US, the UK, and newly independent states in Africa. These organized visits, correspondences, and conferences enabled the formation of reciprocal solidarities based on a shared experience of anti-Black violence (Swan 2022).

This reframing would mean a rejection of the disposability politics aimed at the majority world, including the Pacific and other islands. The AOSIS already includes non-island members, and the Climate Vulnerable Forum

(CVF) is formed around vulnerability as a basis of solidarity. The imaginative category of the vulnerable island is then not truly about islandness but about the fantasy of an island. For this reason, Davis draws a distinction between the island as a physically existing geographic space and the island as deployed by scholars as a “modernist label for an isolated and disconnected realm *that may or may not be actually geographic*” (Davis 2021, 416–417, emphasis in original). It is this isolated and disconnected realm that becomes the sinking island. Undoing this fantasy is therefore a question of pursuing a solidarity formed around a shared reliance on a planet of islands in a large ocean.

Conclusion

In this article, I have outlined two dominant conceptualizations of climate change vulnerability that operate through climate politics. I have argued that both of these conceptualizations – a positivist, material vulnerability that can be measured and ranked, and a discursive vulnerability that is embedded in imaginative geographies of risk – reproduce colonial fantasies of invulnerability through their underlying logics. In order to unpack this coloniality, I have focused on three fantasies of invulnerability: the fantasies of modernity, mastery, and continentalism. All three fantasies rest on the assumption that climate impacts can somehow be avoided, through masculine techno-fixes, capitalist development, or a racialized, geographically imagined superiority. I have shown how critical theory has the tools to reject these fantasies, and how this work applies to climate politics.

Principally, I have argued that it is the work of critical feminist and decolonial theory – especially the work that has come from Oceania, where vulnerability is both normalized and resisted – that can most effectively pierce the fantasies of invulnerability. Oceanic thought can expose the self-sustaining unsustainable cycle that is the false promise of achieving invulnerability through the fantasy of modernity. Against the fantasy of mastery, Oceanic thought can challenge the individualist and interactional relation between humans and nature that dominates under capitalism. Finally, against the fantasy of continentalism, Oceanic thought can disrupt the idea of states and places as separate islands of (in)vulnerability, and instead center global solidarities that resist the harms of colonialism and capitalism.

Notes

1. *Aloha* is usually translated as “love” in English, but it is more expansive than merely the romantic dimension of the English word.
2. In Elizabeth Daphineer’s *The Politics of Exile*, Luka and Jelena have a debate in these terms. Whether war is possible depends on whether they are “in Europe”

or not – Europe being defined as the place where war does not happen: “‘Look, it’s time to calm down. This is Europe.’ Luka looked at his father, who was staring gravely at him. ‘No, it’s not Europe,’ Jelena replied tersely” (Dauphinee 2013, 47).

3. However, Centrex, an Australian mining company, is lobbying for rights to prospect and re-mine Banaba, strongly resisted by many Banaban people with the call of “Never again” (Teririaki 2023).
4. *Mana* is “a spiritual and emotional power that an individual increases and refines through leadership and other kinds of relationships with others.” *Pono* refers to “a balanced object or person at equilibrium between those things that are male and female, easy and disciplined, sacred and ordinary.” *Kuleana* are “one’s obligations to the family, to the community, and to the land that are both responsibilities and privileges at the same time” (Osorio 2011, 299).

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