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Climate change displacement: Towards ontological security

Carol Farbotko

Climate change displacement is often described as an existential threat, a term that attempts to capture the social, physical, political, and cultural gravity of inhabited areas becoming uninhabitable from impacts of climate change. This paper considers narratives of existential threat as a call for more research into ontological security. Ontological security need not be considered a concept separate from adaptation policy and practice, although currently it is not recognised as a risk that can be reduced or managed. Indeed, a policy gap looms when 'existential threats' of climate change displacement are presumed to be unsolvable. Furthermore, there is very little understanding of what might advance ontological security among already displaced people, and the many more who are at risk of displacement and are aware of the risk. This paper discusses ontological insecurity and ontological security, through an exploration of voluntary immobility in Pacific Island communities grappling with climate change impacts to territory. It explores how voluntary immobility may advance ontological security in the Pacific Islands in the face of these impacts. The paper concludes that 'existential threats' associated with climate change displacement can and should be more widely addressed by policies and planning processes that recognise and advance ontological security.

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1 Introduction

This chapter is a call for more research into, and policy addressing, ontological shifts taking place in the low-lying Pacific Islands and other climate-impacted places around the world – anywhere where a future marked by potential climate change displacement might be described as an existential threat. 'Existential threat' is a concept that is currently being deployed to attempt to capture the social, physical, political, economic, and cultural gravity of inhabited coastal areas and low-lying islands becoming uninhabitable from sea level rise associated with climate change. Existential threat narratives are most commonly associated with the low-lying atoll states of Tuvalu, Kiribati, and Marshall Islands, describing the possibility that entire populations will eventually be displaced from their sovereign territory. Existential threat is also used by leaders of the Pacific Islands more generally to highlight these coastal climate change impacts on the international stage (Ourbak & Magnan, 2018). For example, the Prime Minister of Samoa stated in a speech in Australia in 2018:

> *We are building a collective voice amidst the geopolitical din on the existential threat of climate change that looms for all of our Pacific family. (Hon. Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi, 2018, n.p.)*

Existential threat has become a common trope in (often non-Pacific) journalism coverage of the Pacific Islands, for example, in reporting on Pacific issues associated with international climate change negotiations (e.g. Wyeth, 2017; Young, 2017). Existential threat, additionally, is far from confined to the Pacific Islands or to sea level rise, being a concept equally applicable to the threat of climate change at the global level. It has been used, for instance by the United Nations Secretary-General to describe the "disastrous consequences for people and the natural systems that sustain us" (Guterres as cited in Ghosh, 2018, n.p.).

'Ontology' can be defined as the study of being, so 'ontological security' is concerned with security of being. Scholars of the Anthropocene (e.g. Beck, 2016; Weinstein & Colebrook, 2017) consider the threat of climate change as ontological. Central to this task is the question of whether the very experience of being secure as a human changes in the context of catastrophic altering of global systems by humans. Climate change, it is frequently argued in Anthropocene studies, is fundamentally a shift in what it means to be human. Beck (2016, p.1) writes:

> *Climate change is an agent of metamorphosis. It has already altered our way of being in the world – the way we live in the world, think about the world, and seek to act upon the world through social action and politics.*

Beck is not referring specifically to climate change and displacement, but his idea of metamorphosis suggests the importance of exploring more deeply how

the physical impacts of climate change are related to ontological change. This seems particularly important in contexts where knowledge of displacement risk is high and where populations have been living with knowledge of such risk for many years. Such is the case in many small, low-lying Pacific Islands. This paper thus takes as its point of departure the proposition that narratives of existential threat point to a need for research into potentially profound shifts in the ontological worlds of people living with the threat of their homes becoming uninhabitable. Are they experiencing ontological insecurity? Addressing this question means considering populations at risk of displacement first and foremost as political subjects (Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2017). Thus, further questions include: how does knowledge of the risk of climate change to territory change the way in which a stable sense of a political self is maintained? Are profound ontological shifts being experienced by people in the low-lying and coastal areas of the Pacific Islands facing this threat?

Societies, their cultures, and sub-cultures are defined and shaped (although not determined) by place. It is reasonable to hypothesise that knowledge of climate change risks to territory might result in a state of profound uncertainty and anxiety, as ontological worlds become challenged, before physical risks have become manifest (see Crook & Rudiak-Gould, 2018; Kempf & Hermann, 2014). On the other hand, Pacific indigeneity and spirituality are beginning to be recognised as important cultural-political resources for those at risk of displacement and other climate change impacts (Havea, Hemstock, Des Combes, & Luetz, 2018; Teaiwa, 2018). Multiple accounts and narratives, deeper understanding of beliefs and spiritualities, and greater recognition of shifting ontologies are needed, particularly where science reaches its limits. For example, religion plays a complex role in Pacific Island worlds where pre-Christian and Christian beliefs, already sometimes intermingling, also combine with climate change narratives in ways that do not necessarily accord with science-based decision-making (Fair, 2018; Kempf, 2017; Fair, this volume).

Ontological security is a concept that has been useful in international relations research to articulate relationships between identity and security, and between identity and political outcomes. Its foundation is in the idea of political subjectivity as socially constituted, and it has observable effects (Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2017). Ontological security has been described as follows, drawing on the work of Giddens (1991):

> *The premise of ontological security, as discussed by Giddens, is that the formation of the subject is fraught with an underlying, ineradicable anxiety. Since all social actors need a stable sense of self in order to realise a sense of agency, managing that fundamental anxiety is an ongoing project. Actors are viewed as ontologically secure when they feel they have a sense of biographical continuity and wholeness that is supported and recognised in and through their relations with others. When the relationships and understandings that actors rely on become destabilised, on the other hand, ontological*

> *security is threatened, and the result may be anxiety, paralysis or violence. (Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2017, p. 4)*

Thus this paper considers international relations ideas on ontological security to begin to examine questions of continuity and disruption of political subjectivity in the context of climate change impacts. It should be noted that approaches to ontological security are plural in scope and method, offering multiple accounts of changing political subjectivities, across and between not only individuals, but also communities and states as the referent object (Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2017). Thus, it would be possible and indeed desirable to consider if and how ontological security is threatened in various and possibly conflicting ways among different social groups and scales in the context of climate change impacts on territory. For example, a hypothetical sub-national community may produce different narratives about its (changing) sense of being as sea-level rise impacts compound, compared with those of the nation-state. Within sub-national communities there may be variations again between and among different smaller subgroups.

Ontological shifts might be detected by considering ways in which populations facing significant climate change impacts are questioning their worlds and their futures. Research is needed to investigate the type of questions being posed: these might include: Are we still who we were? Will we still be 'us' in the future? What is our future identity going to be? How will we know what our culture and identity is and should be? While such questions can be and are alluded to in formal international climate change politics, as well as in activism and the arts, there is currently very little space for these to be aired or addressed, in the rather technocratic world of climate change adaptation projects, or in relocation and migration governance. Ontological security is currently a concept effectively absent from adaptation policy and practice, broadly defined. Moreover, ontological *in*security – which can be defined as the absence of ontological security – may be problematic to the extent that it is not recognised as a risk that can be reduced or managed (Sterett, 2018). Indeed, a policy gap looms when the 'existential threat' of climate change displacement is presumed to be unsolvable (see also Barnett, 2017).

However, precisely because there is little recognition of ontological insecurity and yet 'existential threat' is a trope with staying power in politics and the media, more research is needed. It is certainly important to understand if ontological insecurity arises from anticipation of being forced to leave territory that is historically and culturally significant. To explore how to advance ontological security, significantly more work is needed that bridges gaps between political narratives, population experiences, and international and national policies. This chapter itself sits at an uneasy juncture between two very disparate realms, and only begins to flag such an agenda. It attempts to speak to both ontological security, as discussed mainly by international relations scholars, and adaptation

policy and practice, where there is typically little scope for anything ontological. Weinstein and Colebrook's (2017, n.p.) approach to the study of the Anthropocene is to ask "what questions would a being who arrives after humans have wanted us to pose?", and with this ontological challenge in mind, arguably there should be more focus on ontological issues in adaptation. Adaptation, after all, has as its ultimate aim preventing humans, and other living things, from disappearing or becoming harmed in the Anthropocene. However, the disappearance of political identity, and an ongoing sense of ontological security, need not necessarily disappear with territory becoming uninhabitable. Ultimately, it is necessary to raise recognition of the importance of political subjectivity of being, especially if disappearing islands or low-lying coasts no longer exist, in the sense of being no longer habitable in the eyes of their inhabitants. 'Ontological security' perhaps should be considered a useful conceptual tool when existential threat descriptors are being applied. In short, the question of changing ontologies and political subjectivities needs to be recognised as an important one in climate change adaptation research and practice.

The remainder of this chapter offers some preliminary exploration of ontological security issues through a case study of voluntary immobility, and a discussion of how ontological security might be more deeply explored in the context of communities in low-lying and coastal areas of the Pacific Islands facing displacement risk. I do not present empirical findings arising from primary data, but rather craft an initial call for more research using a conceptual case study. I also draw upon secondary data, mainly from anthropological and indigenous knowledges in and of the Pacific Islands. The lack of primary data on ontological security and ontological insecurity is hereby flagged as a priority research need.

2 Case study: voluntary immobility, an 'existential threat' in a policy vacuum

In climate change adaptation theory and practice, physical retreat from highly vulnerable places is generally assumed to be inevitable in certain circumstances – when in situ adaptation, including accommodation and protection measures, have been exhausted (Hino, Field, & Mach, 2017). Currently, in the Pacific Islands, many communities at risk from coastal climate change impacts are focusing on on-site accommodation and protection adaptation measures; these include building sea walls and planting mangroves (Nunn & McNamara, this volume). However, there is increasing governmental recognition that such adaptation measures are not going to be sufficient and hence planning for local relocations – retreat – is being instituted in some countries such as Fiji (e.g. Charan, Kaur, & Singh, 2017). For low-lying atolls, retreat may at some point become impossible, and migration may become necessary.

However, the questions of eventual retreat and migration, while important, are far from the whole story. Some communities may not be prepared to retreat or migrate following attempts to 'accommodate' and 'protect'. Households and communities that choose not to retreat or migrate, when in situ adaptation options have been exhausted, are different to 'trapped populations', who wish to leave but cannot. These are the voluntarily immobile (Zickgraf, 2018). While migration and relocation are often assumed to be inevitable at some unknown future point for some groups, voluntary immobility, which challenges this assumption, is far less anticipated, understood, or planned for (Farbotko & McMichael, 2019). The question of communities or households choosing to stay in areas that are becoming technically uninhabitable, often for cultural, emotional, and spiritual reasons, is an important one (Charan et al., 2017; Farbotko, 2018b). Complex subjectivities are at stake, such as self-determination, political agency, religion, ancestral ties to place, and cultural identity. Some households and communities in the Pacific are expressing an intention to be voluntarily immobile, but little is known about how they can be best supported (Farbotko & McMichael, 2019; Farbotko, 2018b). 'Technically uninhabitable' in this paper refers to decision-making following assessment of environmentally vulnerable areas by planners, engineers, and other expert outsiders, as part of a formal governance process that identifies particular material assets such as housing to be considered too high risk and hence candidates for relocation. The technical assessment, possibly implicitly, makes a pronouncement on habitability, and may be understood as a 'limit' to adaptation (Dow et al., 2013). However, this technical knowledge may not accord with local knowledges, which again may differ on what conditions render an area uninhabitable.

Voluntary immobility is an underdeveloped branch of climate change adaptation (Farbotko & McMichael, 2019). While there is increased recognition among policy-makers and scholars of the importance of community participation in adaptation planning that involves the identification of areas as potentially technically uninhabitable (Koslov, 2016), what is less well recognised is that voluntary immobility is a possible outcome of such planning, and is thus itself a valid policy problematic (Farbotko, 2018a). Indeed, there is little recognition of the possibility of voluntary immobility in adaptation practice, since it seems to be generally assumed that inhabitants will conform to the planning processes for relocation following technical assessment of areas of high risk, with forced relocation occurring in the few instances where such conformation is not forthcoming.

However, there are some calls for better planning and support for people who choose not to leave their homes or ancestral lands, even when considered unsuitable for human habitation by adaptation experts and planners (Zickgraf, 2018; Farbotko, 2018a; Farbotko & McMichael, 2019). It is important to point out that voluntary immobility may not be particularly useful in addressing physical or livelihood risk, and in fact in some cases may increase these risks. How-

ever, if voluntary immobility decisions are made, national and international institutions arguably have important responsibilities (Zickgraf, 2018; Farbotko & McMichael, 2019). These include developing formal processes to confirm that all in situ adaptation options have been exhausted; ongoing engagement in culturally sensitive dialogue with communities about their future; and implementation of measures to protect human rights and human dignity. For those who choose voluntary immobility, it may be a cultural, spiritual, and philosophical impossibility to countenance the possibility of life without a homeland to live in or return to. In this sense, any persistence of voluntary immobility despite known physical risks indicates that voluntary immobility may be an ontological response to the existential threat of climate change. Forced relocation, on the other hand, is known to produce cultural and emotional upheaval. The Banabans, for example, experienced being forcibly relocated from their subnational island of Kiribati, and their territory was literally used as a tool for agricultural colonialism. Their island decimated by phosphate mining for use in farms in Australia and New Zealand, the Banaban people have an enduring strong sense of political identity, even when people and land itself have been removed from indigenous sites. This suggests that resilient, adaptive political subjectivity is paramount when a society faces dislocation of body and land (Teiawa, 2005).

However, very little is known about ontological security in cases of climate change displacement. This is one research and policy vacuum where a deeper understanding of ontological security may prove useful.

3 Towards understanding ontological security in the Pacific Islands

In the Pacific Islands, the risk of coastal climate change impacts is often simplified, in dominant external agendas, to accord with non-Oceanic logics; reduced to a binary of staying or going (see Methmann & Oels, 2015). A 'rational', non-Oceanic response is to go on any terms, not, as is sometimes expressed, to stay and die (Farbotko, Stratford, & Lazrus, 2016; Methmann & Oels, 2015). Pacific Island populations have also expressed determination to retain their identities and cultures, given these seemingly intractable challenges in the "roots and routes" of their "sea of islands" (Clifford, 2001; Hau'ofa, 1993, 1998; Teaiwa, 2018). The issue of voluntary immobility, discussed above, can be interpreted as a refusal to go, or perhaps a refusal to engage in binary thinking about displacement risk, or both (Farbotko, 2018b).

To understand if and how voluntary immobility contributes to ontological security, however, it is necessary to understand the context in which ontological security in the smaller islands of the Pacific has been challenged and maintained over time. In this, I draw on previous work on **banua* I developed with col-

leagues (Suliman et al., 2019), which in turn draws heavily on various Pacific studies and archaeology scholars, here applying an ontological lens. Crucial to ontological security in small islands in the Pacific, arguably, is the concept of connected people and place, variations on the common root word **banua,* found throughout many parts of the Pacific Islands where Austronesian languages exist. **Banua* referred to "an inhabited territory which included the village and its population together with everything that contributed to the life support system of that community" (Blust, 1987, p. 100). **Banua* has been described as "the ground of belonging, the locus of being [indigenous in the Pacific], the means of livelihood and the nurturer of life" (Havea, 2007, p. 51). Indeed, in some parts of Polynesia, **banua* refers also to placenta, which in turn needs to be understood in terms of the psycho-socio-ecological practice of burying a newborn's placenta in family land, where it belongs, entailing a lifetime of care of people in, of, and for the land (Māhina, 2008; Falefou, 2017). For instance, in Tuvalu, a coconut tree under which a baby's placenta is buried is nurtured by the placenta. It cannot be cut by another, ensuring all its sustaining qualities are available to the newborn throughout their life. In times of hardship, return to the coconut tree ensures sustenance. The tree, the land, and the placenta together bring people together with their world in a harmonious web, a reference point of spiritual, environmental, and bodily nourishment, a way of ensuring a holistic sustainability.

In terms of ontological security, it seems crucial to try and pinpoint moments of ontological change, challenge, and transformation in the worlds defined by **banua*, following Suliman et al. (2019). The ancestors of many Pacific Islanders, the Austronesians, were, it is believed, the first in the world to navigate out of sight of land. A pivotal moment in Austronesian ontologies arguably occurred when the first double-hulled voyaging canoes navigated by the stars across the expanses of the Pacific Ocean. This happened, according to archaeologists, when they first canoed out of the Solomon Islands towards Fiji, Samoa, and Tonga more than 3,000 years ago (Diaz, 2011). It is now widely accepted that this, the first migration to and settlement of the previously uninhabited islands of the Pacific, was willing and deliberate. The ancestors of today's Micronesians and Polynesians were, it seems, the first humans – globally – to experience the ocean out of sight of land, without losing themselves (Suliman et al., 2019). This incredible feat was possible with a thorough knowledge of wind, tides, ocean creatures, astronomy, and their interconnectedness (Diaz, 2011). A way of being part of the ocean had been discovered, an ontology was born that was defined as much by island absence as watery presence. It was both masterful and humble.

The astronomical-oceanic map and compass of the settlers of the Pacific was arguably central to the ontological transformation, becoming a way for a people to define their identity and their destiny in their sea of islands (Hau'ofa, 1993). This is mobility not as Western ontologies might understand it, but as

conceptualised by the navigators themselves in terms of stillness of the navigator's canoe in a moving, changing cosmos, with home equally an oceanic as a terrestrial concept (Diaz, 2011; Kyselka, 1987; Lewis, 2004; Jolly, 2001). This ontological stillness is known from accounts of revivalists, who have sought out disappearing navigational knowledge and rediscovered the ontological world of their ancestors (e.g. the Polynesian Voyaging Society) (Finney, 2003; Diaz, 2011). So the navigating self is still. It is the ocean and stars that are mobile. Even land moves from its absence towards the canoe (Diaz, 2011).

The first navigation out of sight of land was thus a profound moment in social and technological history globally, and it was an equally important moment ontologically. A new way of being had been discovered. Ontological security, in a very profound, transformative sense, was arguably achieved in the act of navigating into a new world of being, the new world that emerged when out of sight of land. This ontological security was itself dependent on the mobility of the ancient Austronesian concept of **banua*. **Banua* predated settlement of the Pacific Islands by the first ocean-going canoes; it has both endured and transformed over thousands of years as the speakers of Austronesian languages travelled from Taiwan, through South East Asia and only later out into the Pacific Islands, navigating, exploring, sometimes drifting, invading, getting exiled, crisscrossing the ocean until most of the islands were inhabited, arrivals and departures frequent until Western colonisation. According to Taiwanese anthropologist of Fiji Hao-Li Lin, "to the Austronesian settlers the "land" is where societies are made, where identities are rooted, and where the pasts can be remembered. However, it cannot be understood separately as natural environment outside the human realm passively waiting to be occupied and utilized. Instead, it is active and encompassing with a life of its own" (Lin, 2015, p. 28).

Importantly, **banua* is, in part, mobile (Suliman et al., 2019). As **banua* took on particularities and uniqueness across the Pacific, becoming *vanua* in Fiji and Vanuatu, *fonua* in Tonga, *whenua* in New Zealand, *fenua* in Tuvalu, and so on, the distribution of **banua* across the Pacific was also interconnected and hybrid. The Pacific Islands region was never a static realm of sedentary people (at least outside some parts of Melanesia, especially Papua New Guinea, where non-Austronesian languages also exist); it was always about oceanic voyaging and hence about movement and change of the world itself, while people were centred and still. From this stillness, the unique forms of **banua*, even though currently seen as distinctly Fijian or Tongan or Maori or Tuvaluan, for instance, viewed from a deeper temporal perspective, are always in a process of repositioning place and identity. A sense of being defined in terms of human stillness within a moving cosmos thus may be crucial to ontological security in the newest case of ontological challenge in the small islands of the Pacific, namely climate change (see Suliman et al., 2019). According to Lin:

> *For the Austronesian travelers, land can be seen as an environment in its totality that involves the constant movements and activities of objects and beings beyond a given boundary. […] The notion of *banua thus became their guiding framework to orient themselves in the new social and physical environment and to mediate these changes. (Lin, 2015, p. 29)*

Even prior to that pivotal moment when first navigating out of sight of land, becoming sure of themselves, their place, where they came from and their destiny, stillness of self and **banua* were the cornerstones of a unique ontology, and thus this may also be the foundation of pursuing ontological security in a changing climate. Diaz (2011, p. 28) explains, for example, that from a Pacific sea-faring vantage point islands have never been islands and never will be, but are expanding, contracting, mobile entities, their "coordinates in space and time […] emplotted via the farthest reaches of their indigenous creatures".

Central to ontological security then, may be the ontological act of maintaining awareness of and relating to others through one's position in the world, through the stories and other cultural relations through which identities are built, reaching out far beyond what 'home' may have become in the Anthropocene. In Pacific Islands, a dynamic and mobile oceanic environment also involves a centred stillness in a vastness of time and space. In the **banua* ontology, it would seem that the inhabitants of the Pacific could never lose themselves, once they had experienced themselves as masterful navigators in this environment (Suliman et al., 2019). Navigators understood their place: ontologically in terms of a constant repositioning of the self with reference to a moving cosmos, and physically in an ongoing act of keeping track of one's position on the ocean when out of sight of land. What must be remembered, of course, is that for the last two hundred years and more, there have been experiences of profound ontological insecurity in the Pacific Islands. The effects of colonialism, globalisation, and now climate change have interacted in extremely complex and sometimes unexpected ways, such as through the rise of non-indigenous, particularly Christian, religions (Lumā Vaai & Casimira, 2017). Taking this complexity into account, it nevertheless seems that *prima facie* non-adaptive phenomena, such as voluntary immobility, can be fruitfully explored with reference to the advancement of ontological security, achievable by bringing now hybrid concepts such as **banua* and Christianity simultaneously to the fore.

Ontological security in a changing climate may be understood better through ontologically oriented study of different Pacific Island cultural movements, such as navigational revivals (eg. Polynesian Voyaging Society), activism (eg. Pacific Climate Warriors), and faith-based organisations (eg. Pacific Theological College and Pacific Conference of Churches), many of which also may be understood in terms of a broad decolonisation movement. This is a question for more research. Ontologically sensitive research seems timely given that

Pacific scholars are calling for new balms for the 'raw grief' being experienced about land reclamation as a response to displacement risk, an adaptive strategy being vigorously pursued in the Marshall Islands and Funafuti, capital of Tuvalu but not necessarily welcomed by all of the population. The artificiality of such new land does not appear to address in any ontologically secure way the emotions wrought by climate change, as shared by Marshallese activist Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner in a reflection subtitled "Rituals for Artificial Islands" (Jetñil-Kijiner, 2019).

4 Ontological security

Loss of indigenous territory due to climate change is potentially being experienced by many Pacific Islanders as ontological insecurity. However, expansive, open, and shared across the multiple indigineities of the Pacific Islands since original settlement, **banua* may nevertheless endure beyond the Anthropocene through ongoing, changing, and yet also eternal mutual custodianship of life with ancestors and descendants, at least as long as land is above water (Suliman et al., 2019). This is because **banua* is people and land and a way of reorienting life in a changing world. **Banua* may continue to nurture ontological security in a changing climate, even in the face of individual, family, community, or national despair arising from loss of some territory and damage to some territory in the **banua*. This possibility does not diminish any social, environmental, or economic loss associated with loss of territory. What it does, however, is offer a possible conceptual toolkit to begin to advance ontological security.

Ontological security, for example, may be enabled through voluntary immobility in some cases. It may be a way for households or communities or even nations to attempt to ensure that their political subjectivities remain somewhat stable; a way for their changing sense of what it is to be human to be a little less unnavigable. Local knowledge, for example, which likely supports ontological security, can expand and transform more readily if the place which shapes its meanings is still inhabited. Being in place and pursuing local knowledge–based adaptation, even if the place is damaged and risky, can thus be considered part of ontological adaptation. Supporting voluntary immobility among those facing the prospect of a lost homeland thus, in some cases, may advance ontological security. In Kiribati, for instance, the "Migration with Dignity" policy, with its sensitivity to migrant livelihoods and rights for those faced with displacement, was nevertheless perhaps insufficient to advance ontological security (see Hermann & Kempf, this volume). Now, large-scale land reclamation projects are being prioritised, yet without any understanding of whether or not ontological security might thereby be advanced (Walters, 2019). On the other hand, governments and other organisations who are rightly concerned about risks to life and health bound up in voluntary immobility can sensitively explore long-term,

gradual, and diversified relocation options for younger generations and/or for some community activities by focusing on ontological issues in addition to more observable infrastructural and livelihood needs in relocation consultations. For instance, a village might together with government planners decide to build new housing in safer areas while some subsistence agriculture, community meeting areas, burial grounds, and other culturally important landmarks remain in their original sites, with access to such sites prioritised (see Charan et al., 2017). Community leaders can also formulate with cultural planners how to work with their community, to help them express and come to terms with ontological insecurity associated with loss of ancestral lands. This also may involve the arts, as well as dialogue between different communities facing similar challenges, sharing emerging knowledge within, across, and beyond the Pacific Islands (see Weber, 2015). When it comes to culturally valued land at risk, adaptation needs to be flexible to advance ontological security.

Further research with communities is needed, to inform policy frameworks to support not only technical, economic, and social aspects of adaptation, but also the ontological challenges, and perhaps opportunities, of displacement risk. Recognising ontological security, and from there communicating and planning with Pacific people in ethically and culturally appropriate ways, presents international and national policy challenges. New conceptual frameworks are needed in which ontological security is taken seriously in adaptation planning and relocation planning in particular. Ontological security, like material and physical security, needs explicit recognition and action in relocation efforts, for instance (Gharbaoui & Blocher, 2016). As a matter of climate justice, the onus is on development organisations, donors, national governments, and other external actors to engage with ontological issues among people at risk of displacement, or perhaps already displaced, which are often expressed but not 'heard'. Finding the appropriate balance between ontological security and material wellbeing of people and place is crucial. This is no easy task. It is likely that ontological security in the Anthropocene is elusive and constrained by entrenched institutional relations all of which are (or should be) ripe for Anthropocenic reimagining, but often act as a constraint to – rather than an enabler of – any type of human security, let alone ontological security. In this context, the confines of the nation-state system and colonial histories loom large:

> *Many Pacific people feel that mobility is no longer available on their terms. Colonialism curtailed their navigation and exploration of the ocean, confining Pacific Island people to villages, and hence many may have lost sight of the mobile possibilities of *banua which their ancestors were free to explore. The confines of the nation-state, with its rigid border controls, sedentarism, and ultimately poor support of mobile people who do not fit the criteria of wealthy, industrialised-world passport holder work strongly against Pacific Island people finding their own mobile destinies in a changing climate. Thus there are many utterances of "we will stay here and die", which is not a*

> *passive fatalism, but […] an active choice and a political resistance to non-indigenous 'solutions' such as international relocations. (Suliman et al., 2019, p. 15)*

Ontological security, may offer new forms of practical and political engagement among Pacific Island people who currently see no other option to advance their ontological security but through pronouncing an intention to "stay here and die". (Farbotko et al., 2016)

5 Conclusion

A perplexing feature of existential threat narratives in the context of climate change is that they are accompanied by very little debate, discussion, or reflection on addressing existential threat. This paper has attempted to shed light on this problem by considering ontological insecurity. I have argued that there is very little research and policy attention being given to what might advance ontological security among the many who are at risk of displacement. Intentions to be voluntarily immobile, for example, may be interpreted as a grassroots attempt to regain ontological security in a changing world. In adaptation research and practice, voluntary immobility may not be considered a rational outcome when physical risk is assessed as significant. But perhaps rationality is not so important in the Anthropocene, given that humanity has probably already commenced metamorphosis, and ontologies are changing (Beck, 2016). According to Kinnvall and Mitzen (2017, p. 4) ontological security is observable when people "feel they have a sense of biographical continuity and wholeness that is supported and recognised in and through their relations with others". Understanding 'biographical' here more broadly in terms of shared and perhaps contested narratives of people at risk of displacement, the notion of ontological security deserves more adaptation research and policy attention.

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