TUVALU AND CLIMATE CHANGE: CONSTRUCTIONS OF ENVIRONMENTAL DISPLACEMENT IN THE *SYDNEY MORNING HERALD*

by
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ABSTRACT. Tuvalu, a place whose image in the 'West' is as a small island state, insignificant and remote on the world stage, is becoming remarkably prominent in connection with the contemporary issue of climate change-related sea-level rise. My aim in this paper is to advance understanding of the linkages between climate change and island places, by exploring the discursive negotiation of the identity of geographically distant islands and island peoples in the Australian news media. Specifically, I use discourse analytic methods to critically explore how, and to what effects, various representations of the Tuvaluan islands and people in an Australian broadsheet, the *Sydney Morning Herald*, emphasize difference between Australia and Tuvalu. My hypothesis is that implicating climate change in the identity of people and place can constitute Tuvaluans as 'tragic victims' of environmental displacement, marginalizing discourses of adaptation for Tuvaluans and other inhabitants of low-lying islands, and silencing alternative constructions of Tuvaluan identity that could emphasize resilience and resourcefulness. By drawing attention to the problematic ways that island identities are constituted in climate change discourse in the news media, I advocate a more critical approach to the production and consumption of representations of climate change.

Key words: climate change, discourse analysis, environmental displacement, island identity, news media, Tuvalu.

Introduction

In 2001, an article was published in a major Australian daily newspaper, the *Sydney Morning Herald*, on the changing nature of language. The author claimed that the term 'environmental refugee' had entered into use in English, 'courtesy of the global warming threat to the Pacific island-nation of Tuvalu' (Wajnryb, *SMH* 2001). The threat to which Wajnryb refers is that of climate change-related sea-level rise. Among social scientists, the term 'environmental refugee' is contested. Environmentally influenced migration, which in this paper I refer to as environmental displacement, ranges from natural disasters to expropriation of land and slow environmental deterioration, making 'environmental refugee' a concept which is difficult to define (Bates, 2002). Nevertheless, Tuvaluans and other inhabitants of atoll states are being referred to increasingly as potential environmental refugees. In this paper, I begin to explore how news reports concerning the effects of climate change are contributing to the constitution of this social identity.

Before climate change became a significant issue, Tuvalu had not attracted much attention beyond the vicinity of the Pacific, aside from the interest of a few historians, geographers, anthropologists, and development practitioners (see e.g. Besnier, 1995; Connell, 1980; Goldsmith, 1985; Knapman *et al*., 2002; Macdonald, 1982; Mellor 2003). Like many other 'micro-states', Tuvalu is often characterized in academic and institutional discourses as inherently economically insignificant, and vulnerable to the ebbs and flows of international capitalism, due to its smallness and remoteness (Knapman *et al*., 2002; Mellor, 2003). This characterization persists despite evidence of a frugal fiscal policy in Tuvalu and creative harnessing of the 'resources of jurisdiction' (Baldacchino and Milne, 2000) by the Tuvaluan government: for example, the leasing of Tuvalu's commercially attractive internet domain, '.tv' (Finin, 2002).

In the late 1980s, climate change-related sea-level rise was identified as a potentially significant problem for low-lying islands (Pernetta and Hughes, 1990). Composed entirely of islands elevated no more than 4.5 metres above sea-level, climate change was, and continues to be, seen as a significant issue for Tuvalu (Lewis, 1989), and other atoll countries such as Kiribati and the Marshall Islands (Connell, 1993). Tuvalu is a place where sea-level rise and other climate change impacts are likely to contribute to saltwater intrusion, long-term loss of land, and damage to ecosystems, agriculture and livelihoods (McCarthy *et al*., 2001; Sem *et al*., 1996).

Representations of Tuvalu and climate change are routinely produced in non-island places and es-

pecially in the West. Representations of specific places in talk, images and texts are constitutive of identity (see e.g. Anderson, 1991; Chang and Lim, 2004; Wallwork and Dixon, 2004). Gupta and Ferguson (1997, p. 13) stress that 'identity neither "grows out" of rooted communities nor is a thing that can be possessed or owned by individual or collective social actors. It is, instead a mobile, often unstable relation of difference.' In this paper I am concerned with popular imagery of Tuvalu as represented in an Australian broadsheet, the *Sydney Morning Herald*. My purpose is to advance understanding of how islands are constituted from outside, and to contribute to the growing body of literature in which 'island' is conceptualized as a problematic (rather than axiomatic) category (Anderson, 1991). That small states, especially islands, are often subject to orthodox perspectives which may have little relevance to the life of their inhabitants is well established (Baldacchino, 1993; Baldacchino and Milne, 2000; Hau'ofa, 1993; Prasad, 2004). However, the linkages between and among climate change, island places and identity within this critical framework have not been extensively examined. In order to contribute to remedies to this omission, my aim in this paper is to explore the discursive negotiation of the identity of geographically distant islands and island peoples in the Australian news media. Specifically, I use discourse analytic methods to critically analyse how representations of the Tuvaluan islands and Tuvaluan people in the *Sydney Morning Herald* emphasize difference between Australia and Tuvalu in the context of climate change. Drawing on insights from critical enquiries into place-based identity in the social sciences, and island studies in particular, I evaluate in the context of the *Sydney Morning Herald* Wajnryb's suggestive, if flippant, claim that Tuvaluan identity is constituted in terms of environmental displacement. I will argue that implicating climate change in the identity of people and place can construct Tuvaluans as 'tragic victims'. This status marginalizes alternative discourses of adaptation for Tuvaluans and other inhabitants of low-lying islands, and silences alternative constructions of Tuvaluan identity that could emphasize resilience and resourcefulness.

The climate change issue in the context of Tuvalu is constructed in multiple ways. There are myriad competing perspectives among the Tuvaluan population and government, researchers, environmentalists, journalists, development practitioners and others. My identification with the subdiscipline of cultural geography implies that as a researcher I am alert to many truths, in accordance with Haraway's (1991) concept of situated knowledge. The *Sydney Morning Herald* discourse is only one arena where Tuvaluan identity is negotiated, albeit one which in the Australian context is a highly visible and significant arena of public discursive exchange.

Tuvalu and climate change

Tuvalu is an archipelago situated in Western Polynesia (Fig. 1). It is a place with a complex history (see Macdonald, 1982). Tuvalu's Polynesian settlement extends back hundreds of years. Extensive European contact with the Tuvaluan islands commenced in the nineteenth century, and included interaction with whalers, traders, Christian missionaries and administrators. At this time the island group became known as the Ellice Islands, and it was declared a protectorate by Britain in 1892. The islands were administratively amalgamated with the Micronesian Gilbert Islands (now Kiribati) in 1915 (Macdonald, 1975). Together the two island groups formed the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony, a grouping that was dissolved at the end of 1975 when the Ellice Islanders' desire for separation was realized and their islands were renamed Tuvalu. In 1978, Tuvalu achieved independence and in 2000 became a member of the United Nations. Tuvalu has the meaning 'eight standing islands' and refers to the eight island groups that have supported a population for at least several hundred years. These islands are Funafuti, Nanumaga, Nanumea, Niutao, Nui, Nukufetau, Nukulaelae and Vaitupu. The ninth island in the group, Niulakita, was not settled permanently until colonial powers acquired it to provide more land for the people living on the then very crowded island of Niutao. In the middle of 2004, Tuvalu's population was estimated to be 9,600 according to the most recent census undertaken in 2002 (Secretariat of the Pacific Community, 2004).

Since independence, Tuvalu has often been characterized by its vulnerability to environmental and economic shocks, although the government has mostly engaged in sound yet innovative fiscal policies, and the country has displayed enduring social stability (Finin, 2002; Knapman *et al.*, 2002; Mellor, 2003). Sustainability challenges in Tuvalu include managing the pressure on biophysical and social systems from population growth, high population density, changing aspira-

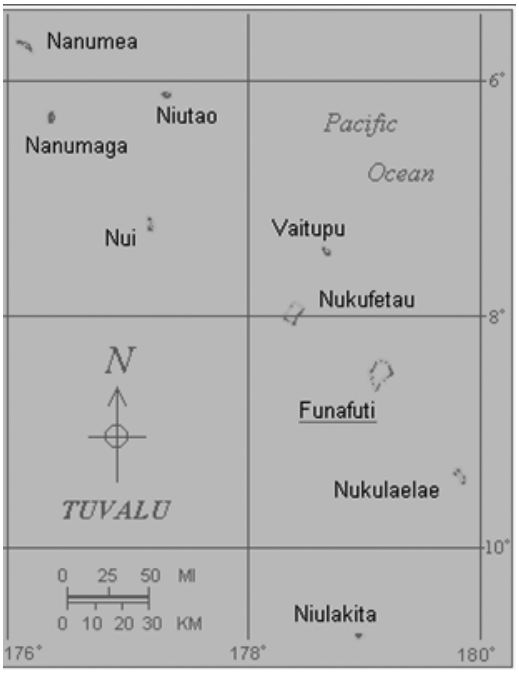

Fig. 1. The Tuvaluan archipelago
Source:http://www.tuvaluislands.com/maps/maps-index.htm, accessed 6th June 2005.

tions and internal migration to the main administrative centre on Funafuti, with an associated increased demand for services and employment (Connell, 1999; Tesfaghiorghis, 1994). Climate change is likely to interact in complex ways with other socio-ecological imperatives in Tuvalu (Sem *et al*., 1996). In its summary of research into climate change impacts, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) indicates that small island states such as Tuvalu are likely to face exacerbated coastal erosion and land loss, increased flooding, increased soil salinization and saltwater intrusion into groundwater, increased frequency of coral bleaching in reef systems and other impacts on biophysical systems (McCarthy *et al*., 2001).

Knowledge, action, speculation and imagination

While climate per se cannot be perceived by individuals, climatic and weather patterns have long been of interest to agricultural, seafaring and island societies. The impacts that climate change has on socio-ecological systems is a rich arena not only for systems of knowledge gathering, but for speculation and imagination (Brönnimann, 2002). Such speculation and imagination does not only happen *in place,* or *on island,* in this case. It also happens at a distance and it is this aspect of island identity with which I am concerned in this paper: how Tuvalu and climate change is represented in news media abroad.

Tuvalu has become a site for competing views not only on what the effects of climate change might be, but also on how to respond to them. From the late 1980s, Tuvalu has been recognized increasingly as a place which is physically very vulnerable to the effects of climate change (Lewis, 1989; Sem *et al*., 1996). However, the physical effects of climate change in Tuvalu are also contested. Attempts to measure changes in sea-level as an impact of climate change, for instance, rely on relatively short-term data from which only provisional conclusions have thus far been drawn (Church *et al*., 2004; Hunter, 2004). Among social science researchers, Tuvalu is variously represented. For some, Tuvalu is a miner's canary, acting as a warning signal for the onset of global climate change catastrophe (Chambers and Chambers, 2001); for another it is symbolic of all threatened islands and greenhouse disasters (Connell, 2003); and for another it is 'the planet writ small' not just in regard to climate change but encompassing environmental challenges more generally (Allen, 2004, p. 52).

Uncertainty of physical effects notwithstanding, various initiatives in Tuvalu have been responsive to climate change concerns. During the international climate change negotiations, the leaders of low-lying and other small island countries lobbied together under the auspices of the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) to have their interests recognized in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) (Ashe *et al*., 1999). Tuvaluan government representatives have since been vocal advocates of global mitigation of climate change through reduced emissions of greenhouse gases in forums such as the United Nations, the UNFCCC Conference of Parties and the Pacific Forum, articulating strong support for the UNFCCC and the Kyoto Protocol, and expressing disappointment in the governments of those countries that do not show similar support (Sopoanga, 2003; Toafa, 2004). In 2004, Acting Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Maatia Toafa, spoke of the threat presented by climate change to Tuvalu at the United Nations General Assembly as follows:

> We in Tuvalu live in constant fear of the adverse impacts of climate change and sea level rise. With a height of a mere three metres above sea level, our livelihoods and sources of food security are already affected badly, with increased salinity in ground water, land erosion, coral bleaching and total anxiety. The threat is real and serious, and is of no difference to a slow and insidious form of terrorism against Tuvalu.
>
> (Toafa, 2004, p. 4)

In 2002, the then Tuvaluan Prime Minister Koloa Talake raised the possibility of pursuing legal redress for climate change damage in international tribunals and the domestic courts of the USA, although no litigation proceedings subsequently commenced (Farbotko, 2005). A National Summit on Sustainable Development (NSSD) in Tuvalu was held in June and July 2004, the outcomes of which will provide a basis for a national development strategy. Within this forum, the Tuvaluan government, island council presidents, island head chiefs, and private and community sector representatives articulated a need to introduce national climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies. In particular, emphasis has been placed on a need to 'promote awareness on adaptation strategies at all levels' and to 'increase awareness on the issue of sea-level rise and climate change' (NSSD, 2004, p. 11). A National Adaptation Programme of Action is also being prepared in Tuvalu. This UNFCCC defined process is intended to identify priority activities, particularly at the community level, for responding to urgent measures for adaptation to climate change (UNFCCC, n.d.).

While Tuvaluan leaders have been particularly successful in voicing their climate change concerns to the rest of the world (Finin, 2002), other Tuvaluans have also been involved in awareness raising. Members of non-government organizations and church leaders have visited Australia, for instance, participating in environmental and media forums, and offering their insights into the complex ways that climate change is being grappled with in Tuvalu (see Toloa, 2004). Predictions for sea-level rise damage fit uncomfortably with a view held by some of Tuvalu's largely Protestant population: that God's promise to Noah meant that the Earth would never again witness a terrible flood (Toloa, 2004). As for relocation of the population, Toloa (2004) constructs this as a last resort, with adaptation measures being extremely important in the immediate future. Clearly, Tuvaluans have a stake both in maintaining their existing livelihoods on Tuvalu, and moving elsewhere if the islands become uninhabitable.

The issue of climate change impacts on Tuvalu has been taken up by various others in different arenas who have their own stake in a vulnerable or resilient Tuvalu. Members of environmental organizations such as Greenpeace and Germanwatch have singled out Tuvalu in the context of climate change campaigns (Greenpeace, n.d.; Ralston *et al.*, 2004). For others Tuvalu represents the diminished credibility of environmental organizations, who 'cry wolf' over climate change impacts (Eschenbach, 2004) or impose their alarmist environmentalist viewpoints on the rest of the world (see Allen, 2004).

Thus there are multiple arenas in which Tuvalu is known and imagined, including the political, administrative, academic, cultural and popular, in Tuvalu, in Australia and elsewhere. Within this multiplicity of discourses, ideas circulate, at times being reinforced and at times contested. In the popular Australian imagination, the Pacific Island states as a group occupy a complex position that uncomfortably straddles notions of tropical paradises, 'failed states' and holiday resorts. Of course, there is no such thing as an undifferentiated 'popular imagination'. The popular consciousness is itself constituted of many imaginations, which interact with the 'intersecting worlds of the bureaucrat, the politician, the foreign affairs journalist, and the academic economist', in which there is a continuing assumption that Australians have a 'special right to manage' the affairs of their Pacific neighbours, and thus also to imagine the Pacific in ways that promote superiority and exclusion amid claims of advancing equality (Fry, 1997, p. 305). Australians have envisaged themselves as natural leaders in the Pacific region, elevating European cultural and economic practices in imaginative and material ways over both Australian indigenous and Pacific Island cultures. A recent manifestation of this subordination for the Pacific emphasizes an island 'doomsday scenario' of political instability, overcrowding, mass unemployment, decline in health and environmental degradation (Fry, 1997).

Examining how climate change and its distant impacts are imagined and represented is a fruitful path for geographers, because 'knowledge of the world and its geographies is constructed in a variety of ways, through experience, learning, memory and imagination' (Driver and Yeoh, 2000, p. 1).

Following Said (1978), the realm of imagination in identity formation is important because it helps us make sense of, and shape, the world around us (Driver, 1999). As Sack (1997, p. 238) has noted, the meanings of climate change depend 'on what we imagine it would be like to dwell in these altered places'. Mediated ideas of climate change impacts, at times originating in places geographically remote from Tuvalu, circulate in conjunction with the mobility of people and things, and via extensive communication networks. These ideas contribute to shaping perceptions of people and places beyond the realm of personal experience (Thompson, 1995). The news media in particular has been invoked as an important arena where representations of low-lying islands in the context of climate change are shaped (Connell, 2003; Hay, 2000). For many readers of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Tuvalu is unknown through direct experience and is created in the imagination through appeals to mediated representations. The prospect of eventual inundation of low-lying atolls has received so much attention in the news media that it would be reasonable to assume that if Australians think about Tuvalu at all, it is likely that many would associate it with sea-level rise.

Connell (2003) cites dramatic and emotional imagery of Tuvalu's disappearing islands in the news media as a source of problematic views of climate change. He argues that such imagery detracts from paying attention to mitigating the 'actual problems' of storm surges, cyclones and groundwater pollution, and the 'real need both to transform those policies in metropolitan states that contribute to global warming and to develop appropriate environmental management policies within atoll states' (Connell, 2003, p. 105). Connell's study sought to normatively evaluate representations of Tuvalu against a truth that the author located in the realm of scientific evidence. It is not my intention in this paper to evaluate the scientific basis of the conflicting claims surrounding sea-level rise in Tuvalu, but to analyse how identity is produced in the imagery and rhetoric of news reports of Tuvalu and climate change.

The *Sydney Morning Herald*

The source of news reports for this study is the *Sydney Morning Herald,* a broadsheet newspaper published daily except Sunday in Sydney, Australia. Sydney is Australia's largest city with a population of 4.2 million (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2003). While the newspaper's geographical epicentre is Sydney, it also has an online version and a distribution in other major cities in Australia. The *Sydney Morning Herald* was selected on the basis of its large readership in Australia and mainstream appeal. Its audience is largely professionals and white-collar workers. In March 2005 the weekday circulation was 210 600 and on Saturdays circulation was 360 173 according to Audit Bureau of Circulation figures (Herald Adcentre, 2005).

The *Sydney Morning Herald* is of interest in itself as an intrinsic case study, 'in all its particularity *and* ordinariness' (Stake, 2000, p. 437, emphasis in original). A newspaper was selected for this study because this medium functions as an interactive discursive arena. Opinion columns and letters to the editor provide an indication of readership response to certain issues, within the bounds of the publication's editorial policy (Richardson, 2001). I searched the online archives of the *Sydney Morning Herald* electronically using 'Tuvalu' as the search term, for the period from 1 January 1990[1] to 1 January 2005.

A total of 117 separate news articles, comments and letters[2] were identified in which Tuvalu was mentioned during the fifteen-year time period, suggesting its minor significance in the Australian news media.[3] The 117 texts were then examined manually to include in the analysis only those that mentioned Tuvalu in the context of climate change or sea-level rise or both. I identified thirty-eight texts (32.5% of the total) where appeals to climate change issues associated with Tuvalu were made, either explicitly or implicitly. Implicit appeals referred to Tuvalu as facing threats such as sinking or submersion without explicit mention of climate change or sea-level rise. A majority (twenty-one) of the selected texts appeared in 2001, seven appeared in 2002 and less than five appeared in each of the other years. The large number of articles, opinions and letters published during 2001 and 2002 commenced with a front-page story on 19 July 2001 headed 'Australia refuses to throw lifeline to drowning Tuvalu' (Wroe, *SMH* 2001). As will be discussed below, during this period there was a great deal of public debate in Australia concerning political asylum-seekers and immigration. Tuvalu's situation was discursively implicated in this wider debate in the *Sydney Morning Herald,* particularly in opinion pieces and letters to the editor. None of these contributions were identified as being made by Tuvaluans.

The city of Sydney is the spatial referent of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, and as such functions as

an organizer of the publication's activities and reporting of events. Parisi and Holcomb (1994, p. 377) argue that 'among discursive systems, the newspaper is pre-eminently linked to place, and the city in particular'. Thus, when world events are reported, they are often angled with reference to the newspaper's locale. In the case of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, news is likely to be not only oriented towards Western, urban and middle class frames of reference, but also constructed from a mainland perspective. The importance of maintaining a critical stance towards mainland perspectives on island issues is evident in the work of McCall (1994; 1996) and Baldacchino (2004), who advocate understanding the rhetoric surrounding island places by studying islands on their own terms.

In light of the foregoing, I approached the news texts using discourse analysis as my methodological framework. Discourse analysis is the study of the rhetorical organization of texts, investigating how constructions of the world are designed so they appear as stable facts and how alternatives are undermined. Within discourse analysis, written and spoken language and images are considered to be 'constructions of the world oriented towards social action' (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002, p. 96). Thus I probed the texts using qualitative, thematic analysis, enabling exploration of how accounts of Tuvalu and climate change were organized and constructed, and what discursive effects they accomplished. I paid particular attention to narrative silences, and partial, simplified and selective representations (Hubbard *et al*., 2002) that I discerned as springing from the *Sydney Morning Herald* contributors' predominantly mainland perspectives. The imagery and rhetoric attached to Tuvalu in the *Sydney Morning Herald* is discussed in detail in the remainder of this paper.

Island identity

Tuvalu and marginality

When Tuvalu became a member of the United Nations, the *Sydney Morning Herald* described a 'new place' for it 'on the watery margin of the international community' (Riley, *SMH* 2000). Tuvalu was thus mapped as peripheral to an unspecified centre of importance among nation-states. The representation of this margin as 'watery' helped to establish another liminal zone for Tuvalu, in the margin between an imagined present and a time of future climate change disaster, in which the Tuvaluan islands experience 'inevitable submersion due to the greenhouse effect' (Murray, *SMH* 2001). A time is constructed in the future when Tuvaluans will be forced to 'seek refuge' (Oliver, *SMH* 2001) in the relative safety of the Australian mainland, 'which has pretty much cornered the market when it comes to dry land' in the southern Pacific Ocean (Fitzsimons, *SMH* 2001).

Australia and Tuvalu are thus represented in a hierarchy of safety. Australia is a secure place, capable of offering a 'lifeline' to 'drowning Tuvalu,' (Wroe, *SMH* 2001), whose low-lying atolls are a place of inherent danger. Tuvalu's future looms ominously in imagery of submersion that highlights the physical vulnerability of islands, and conflates climate change with visions of tragic inundation. In the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Tuvalu is 'drowning', it is a 'tiny nation [that] faces being submerged by rising sea-levels' (Wroe, *SMH* 2001) and the rising ocean will 'swamp' its people (Galvin, *SMH* 2001). Such dramatic imagery establishes climate change-induced sea-level rise as a tsunami-like body of water, a powerful force, impossible for the inhabitants of a small strip of land to defend. [4] The sense of danger is embedded in repeated descriptions of Tuvalu as 'tiny' (Stephens, *SMH* 1998; Wroe, *SMH* 2001) an adjective which emphasizes vulnerability to ocean (and indeed other) forces. Moreover, Tuvaluans become tragic victims when climate change is represented as 'a matter of life and death' (Riley, *SMH* 2000*;* Korn, *SMH* 1999). The fact that Tuvalu is 'a mere 4.5 metres above sea level' is a problem that 'no amount of money can solve' (Korn, *SMH* 1999). The Tuvaluan leaders' canniness in negotiating the country's financial affairs seems to be of little assistance in planning for 'global warming' as 'the big unkown' (Bearup, *SMH* 2001). These representations and their perceived newsworthiness not only render other images of climate change impacts such as drought and saltwater incursion significantly less salient; they also cement a bleak vision of Tuvalu's future and the expected welfare of its inhabitants.

Tuvalu as 'paradise'

The vision of Tuvalu as a tragic place in the context of climate change-related sea-level rise is also constructed by appealing to stereotypical notions of a tropical island paradise. Royle (2001, p. 16) claims that 'the island as paradise concept is burnt into the psyche of the Western world at least, while they enjoy their pampered lives, mostly in the safety and security of the continental heartlands'. For some

Sydney Morning Herald contributors, Tuvalu and other Pacific Islands are paradisaical places (O'Callaghan, *SMH* 1990; Riley, *SMH* 2000; Hill, *SMH* 2001). Appeals are made to mythical and literary notions of a Pacific Island paradise, soon to be paradise lost. Hill (*SMH* 2001) uses paradise imagery to evoke support for Tuvalu's 'cause'. Signifying Tuvalu as a 'slice of Pacific paradise' and being 'in imminent peril of becoming a paradise lost to global warming', Riley (*SMH* 2000) appeals to cherished images of tropical islands as places of both Eden-like abundance and spiritual and moral nourishment away from the wickedness of the world, that have been prominent in Western consciousness at least since the publication of Robinson Crusoe and the Swiss Family Robinson (Loxley, 1990). Riley draws on existing stereotypical images of paradisaical islands to evoke a sense of tragedy, using the emblematic image of a tropical island paradise to anchor his storyline (Markwick, 2001). The sense of tragedy is cemented by appealing to the 'imminent' submersion of Tuvalu (Riley, *SMH* 2000) and the islands become a spectacle. Tuvalu is constructed as a place for people to visit as a curiosity 'before it is too late' (Bragg, *SMH* 1999).

Australia and Tuvalu

Self-definition commences when defining others in exclusionary and stereotypical ways (Bisharat, 1997; Harvey, 1993; Said, 1978). This process is widely regarded as applicable to the identities of people and place (Anderson, 1991; Herb, 2004; Shields, 1991; Wallwork and Dixon, 2004). Thus in the *Sydney Morning Herald,* constructions of Tuvalu as a vulnerable place are in contrast with the constitution of Australia as indomitable and resilient. Locating severe climate change impacts on low-lying islands contributes to a myth that relies on oppositional identity formation in which islands are 'vulnerable' and mainlands are 'secure'. In the *Sydney Morning Herald* texts, statements about climate change were made in such a way as to indicate that the most catastrophic impacts are happening elsewhere, in vulnerable, marginal places, such as Tuvalu. For example, one statement implies a trivialized notion of climate change impacts in Australia, encompassing a slight alteration of weather patterns, while in Tuvalu the impacts are far more tragic: 'climate change doesn't just mean the onset of cloudy weather to Tuvaluans, it is a matter of life and death' (Riley, *SMH* 2000). Climate change is also presented as a problem with immediacy for Tuvalu, and in contrast, a temporally distant concern for people in the West. The Tuvaluans will be 'gone' before they can 'prove to the developed countries the consequences of their actions' (Korn, *SMH* 1999).

An image of Tuvalu as a marginal place threatened with inundation is used for political effect during a commentary on the Australian Labor Party's welfare policy by one *Sydney Morning Herald* contributor. Morton (*SMH* 2001) highlights his concerns with this policy: 'as for the unemployed, well maybe they can move to Tuvalu.' Morton is apparently drawing on a sense of shame in imaginatively locating the socially marginalized on Tuvalu, which by this time has been discursively entrenched for regular readers of the *Sydney Morning Herald* as a vulnerable place. A material version of this perception is apparent in the proposals put forward by the Australian government under the Liberal Party to house asylum-seekers in a detention centre on Tuvalu as part of its 'Pacific solution'. Under that policy, the Australian government requested its counterparts in Tuvalu to detain refugees from other parts of the world seeking asylum in Australia. The irony involved in such a request (Goldsmith, 2002), at a time when the Australian government would not consider an appeal by the Tuvaluan government to accept Tuvaluans as a special class of migrants, did not go unnoticed by *Sydney Morning Herald* contributors and readers, many of whom voiced their sense of shame in the Australian government (Ettema, *SMH* 2001; Foster, *SMH* 2001; Oliver, *SMH* 2001; Skehan and Clennell, *SMH* 2001; Nguyen, *SMH* 2002).

An identity of environmental displacement

The definition of the Tuvaluan islands as marginal, vulnerable places in the *Sydney Morning Herald* is extended to the Tuvaluan population, in a process that intimately links categorizations of objects, practices, ideas and modes of social interaction in marginal places as inferior (Shields, 1991). In what follows I identify two interrelated themes in the *Sydney Morning Herald* texts that were used to construct a Tuvaluan identity in terms of environmental displacement: tragedy and disempowerment. These elements, although not intended to be necessarily exclusive or exhaustive of possible constructions of Tuvaluan identity in the *Sydney Morning Herald,* closely relate to the adverse physical impacts to low-lying islands from sea-level rise

and storm surges associated with climate change. These themes operated in the *Sydney Morning Herald* texts alongside a discursive silence on adaptation and, to some extent, mitigation strategies.

Disempowerment

News texts are sites where, in accordance with a journalistic norm of 'balance', multiple voices are heard. But utterances are nevertheless reported selectively (van Dijk, 1988). In the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the publication of sensational climate change stories privileges expressions of disempowerment and desperation by Tuvaluan leaders. The texts also contain no perceptions of climate change drawn from the general Tuvaluan populace. The perspectives of ordinary Tuvaluan citizens cannot be obtained from the *Sydney Morning Herald* discourse, which, perhaps unsurprisingly, frames Australian–Tuvaluan interactions primarily as an arena of discussions among senior politicians.

On 19 July 2001, the front page of the *Sydney Morning Herald* contained the headline 'Australia refuses to throw lifeline to drowning Tuvalu' (Wroe, *SMH* 2001). The report concerned the negotiation of migration rights for Tuvaluans into Australia, which the Tuvaluan government had sought from the Australian government. It was reported that 'the Tuvaluan government is considering abandoning the islands its people have lived on for thousands of years' (Wroe, *SMH* 2001). Four years earlier, the Tuvalu Statement presented by Toaripi Lauti of Tuvalu's Prime Ministerial Special Envoy On Climate Change, as part of a speech to the UNFCCC – Conference Of Parties 3, contained the following statement:

> Mr President, there is nowhere else on earth that can substitute for our God-given homeland in Tuvalu. The option of relocation as mooted by some countries therefore is utterly insensitive and irresponsible.
>
> (Lauti, 1997, n.p.)

Lauti's determinedly empowering speech was not reported in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, illustrating how news stories concerning Tuvalu can at times represent only a partial account of the ways in which Tuvaluans are grappling with climate change challenges.

Climate change events, and their interpretation, have been represented selectively in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in order to make apparent a sense of inherent newsworthiness (van Dijk, 1988). One of the most salient features of the news texts is their silence on adaptation to climate change impacts, with a dismissal of prospects for effective mitigation, and the portrayal of relocation as the only response option for Tuvaluans. Adaptation in particular is viewed by many researchers and by the Tuvaluan government as an essential component of a threatened community's response to climate change (Barnett, 2001; Huq *et al*., 2003; McCarthy *et al*., 2001; NSSD, 2004). Yet in the *Sydney Morning Herald* discourse there is little capacity for discussion of possible adaptation measures in Tuvalu due to the direct causal linkages that are constructed between climate change, long-term sea-level rise and abandonment of islands. The dramatic vision of a nation 'being submerged by rising sea levels' (Wroe, *SMH* 2001) is employed in such a way that for Tuvaluans, approaching 'Australia and New Zealand about resettlement' is represented as the only possible response to climate change as 'their homeland slowly disappears beneath their feet' (Wroe, *SMH* 2001).

Tragedy

The *Sydney Morning Herald* texts may be read as a binary conflict between Australian leaders and those of the Pacific Island states in the context of climate change. This narrative technique angles news towards local, Australian perspectives, and is a characteristic journalistic device for engaging readership (Parisi and Holcomb, 1994). How the Tuvaluan leaders voice their concerns in this dialogue is instrumental in representing the Tuvaluans as victims, and the Australian leaders as their powerful counterparts. The Tuvaluan leaders are represented as feeling a sense of hopelessness against the impacts of climate change and sadness at the lack of help they receive from other countries. Their voices are heard in the news texts pleading with the Australian government to assist them by committing to the reduction of greenhouse gases and by granting their people migration rights (Wroe, *SMH* 2001). A former Prime Minister, Bikenibeu Paeniu, was twice quoted as saying, 'we are the most vulnerable of the most vulnerable of countries to the effect of sea-level rise' (Korn, *SMH* 2001; Riley, *SMH* 2000). Another former Prime Minister, Koloa Talake, remarks: 'What will happen to all of my 12,000 people?' (Skehan, *SMH* 2002). In these utterances Tuvaluans are internally constituted as victims, at the mercy of the Australian government and its unsympathetic

climate change and border-protection policies. The Tuvaluans are not, intriguingly, represented as victims of the destructive practices of mass-consumption society. In the representation of the conflict over climate change between Australian and Pacific Island leaders, the *Sydney Morning Herald* displays functional conservatism, limiting critique to the realms of government policy without questioning the social practices of mass consumption that also contribute to the climate change problem (Parisi and Holcomb, 1994).

Environmental displacement

As illustrated by the quotations from ministerial sources above, Tuvaluans are implicated in the construction of their identity as climate change victims. In the *Sydney Morning Herald,* Tuvaluan government representatives warn that the population 'could be turned into refugees by rising sea levels' (Skehan and Clennell, *SMH* 2001). This statement may constrain, within a discourse of vulnerability, the way that Tuvaluan identity is constructed in the geographical imagination. Tuvaluan leaders were associated with a group of Pacific Island representatives who lobbied the Bush administration in the USA against a climate change 'modern holocaust' (Skehan, *SMH* 2001b). Identification with refugees is linked to the horrors of genocide. Working within the confines of a Western hegemony that has long perceived their island way of life as economically marginal (Hau'ofa, 1993), the leaders of Tuvalu draw on a sense of tragedy and stereotypes of island vulnerability to highlight their climate change concerns 'as a matter of life and death' (Korn, *SMH* 1999; Riley, *SMH* 2000). Islander identity is constructed in opposition to 'wealthier' (Murray, *SMH* 2001) and 'developed' countries (Korn, *SMH* 1999). The use of dramatic imagery, and the highlighting of a moral battle between islands and the West by Tuvaluan leaders, is compatible with a journalistic emphasis on sensational events that are perceived as newsworthy. In contrast, domestic political events in Tuvalu (such as the vote of no-confidence against Prime Minister Sopoanga in 2004) have not been reported in the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

Thus it is through visions of inundation and environmental refugees that Tuvalu has become essentially perceived in the *Sydney Morning Herald*. These views create a valid context for, and are supported by, Wajnryb's claim that the term 'environmental refugee' was coined in response to Tuvalu's plight (Wajnryb, *SMH* 2001). It also allows for Tuvalu to be labelled 'sinking' with no reference to climate change (Ettema, *SMH* 2001). I do not claim, however, that such a perception is singular and uncontested, nor that my interpretation of the texts excludes other readings. While the *Sydney Morning Herald* is a highly visible news source within Australia, other discourses challenge and resist such a perception (Barnett and Adger, 2001). Martin (2000) has demonstrated that within different news arenas, the construction of place is negotiated through examination of social issues in a dialogue that is constantly in flux. Being a complex and prominent environmental issue, climate change is the subject of considerable dispute. Although examination of different sources of news discourse is beyond the scope of this study, it is important to recognize that while the major, popular presses are particularly influential in the development of place identities in mainstream perspectives, flows of social and physical understandings of climate change are also interpreted and transformed in many other arenas, such as television, radio, the internet, journals, magazines, organizational activities of many kinds, and private discussions (Burgess, 1990).

Privileging sedentarism

Tuvaluan identity in the *Sydney Morning Herald* is constituted not on its own terms but in opposition to perceptions of Australia as a place of safety where environmental refugees could possibly shelter. The reception of political refugees and other immigrants in Australia has been a prominent political issue in recent years and has received a great deal of coverage in the Australian news media. The so-called Tampa incident,[5] the terrorist attacks of 11 September in the USA, and the 'children overboard' event[6] in 2001, were events that prompted passionate debate on the reception of immigrants into Australia (Klocker and Dunn, 2003; Slattery, 2003). Saxton (2003) showed that the *Sydney Morning Herald* drew on nationalist discourses that constructed refugees as undesirable in the physical and imagined national space, contributing to a sanitized racism that facilitated oppressive power relations between the dominant group and racial minorities. Complementary to Saxton's work, in this study I have analysed discursive regularities and silences to show that the racial designation 'Tuvaluan' in the *Sydney Morning Herald* is becoming synonymous with environmental refugees, demonstrating pow-

er in discourse to name and characterize marginalized communities and places (Shields, 1991).

In the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the constitution of Tuvaluan identity in terms of environmental displacement draws on notions of sedentarism entrenched in mainland and Western psyches, in which particular constituencies of people in place are often unquestioningly perceived as natural (Malkki, 1992). The normalization of sedentarism constructs staying in place as a virtue, and validates representations of people who are forcibly moved from place as 'victims'. Moreover, without place, Tuvaluans are constructed as having no future. That such a perspective is typical of the West is argued concisely by McCall (1996) in an island context. He offers an alternative perspective in which islander migration is often a long-established and accepted characteristic of island life. From this island perspective, a sense of tragedy in the context of environmental displacement might be significantly less salient. Thus a critical examination of notions of sedentarism associated with representations of Tuvalu in the *Sydney Morning Herald* reveals particular ideological positions about people in place and time. Privileging the dwelling of people in place and time over movement and change establishes a moral order of 'us here' and 'them elsewhere'.

It is clear that there is no such thing as *one* reality for Tuvalu, but a series of intersecting representations (Massey, 1993). However, in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Tuvalu has become a place associated with a particular reality of vulnerability, a reality that if firmly entrenched becomes difficult to challenge because it appears 'natural' and thus hegemonic. In the *Sydney Morning Herald* discourse, Tuvaluan identity is reduced to that of vulnerable refugees. Tuvaluans are locked into an imaginative spatial and temporal limbo, neither welcome in Australia nor able to 'go home'. Without place they are perceived as homeless and vulnerable. Moreover, Tuvaluans have been implicated in the Australian government's unrelentingly negative portrayal of asylum-seekers (Klocker and Dunn, 2003). The Australian Immigration Minister's position on Tuvalu was that:

> Australia would join a co-ordinated international response to any environmental disaster. But Tuvaluans could not get special treatment as environmental refugees and would have to apply under the migration program like anyone else.
>
> (Wroe, *SMH* 2001)

Constructing Tuvaluan identity in terms of vulnerability can operate to silence alternative identities that could emphasize more empowering qualities of resilience and resourcefulness. While such qualities have been recognized by researchers constructing a 'vulnerability profile' of Tuvalu (Sem *et al.*, 1996), they are often overlooked in external representations of Tuvalu and the Tuvaluan people. According to Sem *et al.* (1996, p. 111), Tuvaluans are people who 'over the centuries [have] indicated that they have been able to fashion vibrant communities from these so-called marginal places'.

Conclusion

In this paper I have sought to analyse conceptualizations of island places by exploring how the complex identity of Tuvalu and Tuvaluans is both negotiated and simplified in the *Sydney Morning Herald*. My aim was to examine the linkages between climate change and island places, by exploring the discursive negotiation of the identity of geographically distant islands and island people in the Australian news media.

In the *Sydney Morning Herald,* appeals are made to stereotypes of island marginality, and Tuvaluan place identity is constructed in opposition to a centralized Australia that is physically more secure and safe in the event of sea-level rise. The Tuvaluan islands are thus identified as vulnerable to a future tragic submersion event. Australians become audience to this spectacle, both drawn to and shamed by the tragedy of a tropical paradise lost.

In terms of people identity, within the *Sydney Morning Herald* discourse Tuvaluans are linked uncritically with the tragic place identity of the islands which they inhabit. The physical vulnerability of islands is conflated with vulnerability in the Tuvaluan social and cultural fabric, a characterization which has also long plagued economic characterizations of island life, and the Tuvaluan economy in particular. Tuvaluans are represented as disempowered in the face of rising sea-levels, helpless victims of the refusal of the leaders of Australia and other Western nations to promote mitigation of climate change or modify their policies towards refugees.

The themes of tragedy and disempowerment may be discerned in the *Sydney Morning Herald,* entrenching Tuvaluan identity in the concept of environmental displacement. Tuvaluans are represented as environmental refugees, an identity that appeals to sedentary linkages between people and place in the Western psyche that are perceived as

natural. This perception is especially salient in the context of the unrelentingly negative Australian government discourse on refugees. Such an identity is also apparently internally constituted as such by the Tuvaluan leaders. However, the complexity that Tuvaluans perceive in addressing climate change is afforded a partial, simplified outlet in the *Sydney Morning Herald*. There, it is through visions of environmental displacement that Tuvalu has become essentially perceived.

The emphasis on island vulnerabilities in Western news media in the context of climate change-induced sea-level rise can superficially be welcomed as an awareness-raising function to what is undeniably a very frightening phenomenon. However, the construction of Tuvaluans as 'tragic victims' through a hierarchical island/mainland alterity is problematic in the way it presents a particular perspective of Tuvalu, through a lens of vulnerability. Given its mainstream appeal, the *Sydney Morning Herald* is a powerful arena for articulating identity in relation to Tuvalu. By focusing on vulnerability, alternative discourses of adaptation for Tuvaluans are marginalized. Constructing Tuvaluan identity in terms of vulnerability can also operate to silence alternative identities that emphasize more empowering qualities of resilience and resourcefulness. Climate change and sea-level rise are serious threats to current ways of life on Tuvalu. These threats are constructed in ways that privilege sedentarism, entrenching Tuvalu in the marginal space created for it in the geographical imagination.

The association of climate change with identity formation for island places has implications for climate change research and for how climate change imperatives are incorporated into policy, from the local to national and international scales. In the context of climate change and island places, 'vulnerability' is a term that Barnett and Adger (2001, n.p.) suggest is 'conducive to a loss of confidence as it focuses on weaknesses and shortcomings rather than inherent strengths and opportunities'. From this study, uncritical uses of vulnerability imagery have been revealed as problematic, warranting in future research a critical approach to the ways in which vulnerability is manifest in public discourse. This study has highlighted the capacity for vulnerability rhetoric to silence discourses of adaptation. Adaptive strategies are significant for island peoples faced with climate change, and should be debated and discussed, rather than muffled, in the public domain. It is adaptation, perhaps even more than relocation or mitigation initiatives, which is of immediate importance in island places, where everyday life, with its attendant issues of social, economic and environmental sustainability in the face of changes brought about by 'global warming', is indeed continuing into the immediate future.

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Notes

1. The earliest date in the *Sydney Morning Herald* electronic archive is 1990. Climate change and sea-level rise first became serious concerns for island communities in the late 1980s. There are likely to have been only a handful of articles before 1990 relating to Tuvalu and climate change.
2. The electronic search yielded 116 of these articles. One article on Tuvalu also appeared in *Good Weekend,* a magazine supplement to the Saturday edition of the *Sydney Morning Herald* which was not included in the electronic database, bringing the total number of articles to 117.
3. During the same fifteen-year time period, for instance, there were 3,546 separate texts in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in which another, larger Pacific state, the Fiji Islands, was mentioned.
4. Although published before the tsunami which struck parts of Asia and Africa on 26 December 2004, this type of imagery gains increased salience following that natural disaster. Soon after the tsunami, discursive connections were being made between the threat of sea-level rise, Tuvalu and tsunamis in media reports of United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan's speech at the International Meeting for the ten-year Review of the Barbados Programme of Action in Port Luis, Mauritius, in January 2005 (Reuters, 2005). Interestingly, Tuvalu's vulnerability to damage from tsunamis has been rated as 'non-existent' (United Nations Development Programme, 1999, p. 30).
5. The *Tampa* was a Norwegian vessel whose captain rescued a group of mainly Afghan asylum-seekers from a boat that was in trouble in Australian waters. The Australian government refused to allow the asylum-seekers on to Australian territory. With the agreement of the governments of Papua New Guinea and Nauru, the asylum-seekers were removed to Manus Island and Nauru under the Australian government's so-called 'Pacific Solution'. By locating the asylum-seekers beyond Australian territory, the Australian government had no obligation to accept the group for settlement in the event that their claims to political refugee status were upheld (Jupp, 2003).
6. The 'children overboard' event involved the Australian Prime Minister and senior ministers accusing Iraqi asylum-seekers of throwing children overboard when they were intercepted by the Australian Navy in a boat near Christmas Island. The veracity of the 'children overboard' accusations has since been discredited following an Australian Senate inquiry (Australian Parliamentary Hansard, 2002).

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APPENDIX: *SYDNEY MORNING HERALD TEXTS*

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