

Blue Hegemonies: Confluences of Geocultural Power in the Pacific

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Abstract

Hegemonic international relations in and of the Pacific are often cast in geopolitical and economic terms in scholarly literature, diplomacy, and media. This article builds from work on “geoculture” to advance the practice of thinking geoculturally about international relations. I argue that thinking geoculturally is a useful heuristic to examine the spatial fix on the Pacific which is exemplified in “blue” environmental discourses. Blue discourses are deployed by global, continental hegemonies to demarcate the Pacific into regional formations, hegemonic development paradigms, and ongoing forms of peripheralization. Concurrently, the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), a multinational diplomatic entity, inverts continentalist dynamics by advancing the counternarrative of the “Blue Pacific Continent” to advocate a pan-Pacific affinity politics which is currently focused on countering the climate crisis. However, recent events within the PIF indicate ongoing hegemonies of Polynesia and Melanesia at the expense of Micronesia. The construction of “blue hegemonies” envelops Native Pacific ways of engaging with seas and oceans into imperialist discourses while blue hegemonic entities imagine and attempt to actualize different Pacific futures. The article follows Diaz (2018; 2019b) in suggesting that contracting notions of oceanic world enlargement into specific locales and depths of place holds potential for more liberatory politics.

Introduction

The Pacific is one of the most capacious bodies on earth, yet it is often peripheralized by continental, land-centric imaginations (Kauanui, 2015; Jones, 2024). Global hegemonies often cast the Pacific as a staging ground for their grander geopolitical securitization schemes or as a liquid body through which their geoeconomic power flows. Militarization, land and water grabbing, extractionism, and more-than-human displacements continue without regard for local concerns. From some corners of the continental imagination, this era also has seen to a resurgence of declarations like “it’s time to talk to, not at, the Pacific” (Powles and Wallis, 2022). This tends to take shape in the form of continental hegemonies co-opting oceanic discourses to obtain local buy-in and reproduce geopolitical and geoeconomic hegemony. In the current era, the *blueness* of the ocean continuously emerges as a conceptual frame for geopolitical and geoeconomic engagements. Diplomatic dynamics between Pacific states, China, and the United States (US) are often framed in terms of blue economy, blue partnership, and blue competition. Blue also plays a role in contemporary forms of Pacific regionalism in the discourse of the Blue Pacific Continent, a pan-Pacific framework for asserting regional concerns in a global context. However, certain Pacific hegemonies are reproduced through the historical and ongoing elision of Micronesia within regionalized formations of Pacific identity and diplomacy.

This article intervenes in geopolitical/geoeconomic framings of international relations by suggesting that a *geocultural* lens or vocabulary is a useful for dissecting the infusion of environmental discourses into diplomacy and reproductions of hegemony (de Koeijer and Shilliam, 2021). By geocultural, I refer to “geographical arrangements of culture across boundaries, how it is constituted through networks, flows, and coalitions” (Winter, 2022c, p. 10). The article has three broad aims: 1) To advocate for the utility of geocultural analysis alongside the more dominant frameworks of geopolitics and geoeconomics, 2) To show how blue environmental discourses are central to hegemonic

power relations in the Pacific, and 3) To suggest that projections of geocultural heritage and legacy symbolize different senses of Pacific futurity, or the ways in which “groups imagine and produce knowledge about futures” (Goodyear-Ka’ōpua, 2018, p. 86). After opening with a brief background of the concept of geoculture and advancing the practice of “thinking geoculturally,” the article then presents blue discourses that recently emerged as a conceptual frame in Pacific policy and diplomacy before considering Micronesia’s place within the Blue Pacific Continent.

Thinking Geoculturally at the Edge of the Lifeworld

The concept of geoculture was advanced by sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein but undertheorized in his world-systems analysis (WSA) of global capitalism, often oriented towards structurally deterministic state-centrism. Wallerstein (1991) conceived of geoculture as the culture of the capitalist world-system. Wallerstein’s use of geoculture recognized linkages between culture and ideology among powerful liberal states but deemed it as secondary to the “real” geopolitical hegemony of the capitalist world-economy (Agnew, 2021). While Wallerstein (1993) argued that national cultures are not singular coherent structures but “are constructed and regularly reconstructed mythologies,” (p. 216) his application of geoculture as the *singular* culture of global capitalism problematically reinforced spatial peripheralization of nations, places, and cultures outside imperial cores. As Pacific historian David Hanlon (1989) states, the legacy of core-periphery dualisms in Micronesia was that of subordinating the “islands’ past to the role of footnote in a world history dominated by the global expansion of European economic practices and institutions (p. 11).”

Despite the historical shortcomings of “geoculture” within a structurally deterministic approach that conflates “the global with the universal” (Behbehanian and Burawoy, 2012), I find that “thinking geoculturally” (Hannerz, 2009; Winter, 2019) is a useful analytical tool for disentangling environmental and cultural discourses in the creation of nation-state narratives and international relations. For instance, Tim

Winter's (2019; 2022b) work analyzes China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a globe-spanning development partnership framework, as a re-imagining of the Silk Road for the twenty-first century. The Silk Road was an extensive trade route stretching across Eurasia from around the second century BCE through the mid-15th century (Winter 2019; 2022c). The BRI is a contemporary framework through which the People's Republic of China (PRC) can position itself as a neutral arbiter of peaceful co-development. It does so by casting the nation's geopolitical and geoeconomic engagements through a sense heritage diplomacy (Winter, 2022a) informed by place, culture, and historic overland and maritime linkages. In other words, it advances a narrative of geocultural power specific to Chinese historical infrastructures and legacies.

To understand dynamics of power between states, it is more advantageous to consider multitudes of geocultures and their interactions rather than conceiving of a singular global geoculture (Vysotskyi et al, 2022). Engagements between China, the US, and Pacific states involve actions coming from specific places, legacies, and senses of heritage. States draw upon these factors to produce national narratives and regional identities. As oceans "are spaces in which practices of both territorialization and deterritorialization are constantly occurring" (Davis, 2020, p. 63), the vernacular of geocultural power lends to analysis that peels away the "thick veneers" (Diaz, 2010) of social construction that makes nation-states and regions appear as self-evident "things." Instead of a top-down or binary approach analyzing the imposition of hegemony, "conceptual and empirical attention must be paid to the particularities of place and the discrete conjunctures of events and conditions that occur" within the relational dynamics of interacting hegemonic forces (Shilliam, 2011, p. 6). As Larsen and Johnson (2012) note, "hegemony is challenged when otherness and difference are engaged at the edge of the lifeworld" (p. 643). Thus, Pacific peripherality is a matter of (resituating) perspective. In this article, I discuss the Pacific as a space where confluences of

geocultural power meet and interact and hegemonies are produced, reinforced, and challenged.

Marketizing and Militarizing the Pacific

In Blackfoot scholar Leroy Little Bear's (2000) terms, the Pacific is a place "where jagged worldviews collide" (p. 85). In the current moment, blue discourses can be thought of as one of these collisions or confluences (Barker, 2019). Contemporary blue discourses and the hegemonies they uphold emerge from historical regional constructions. Since at least the 1980s, Western entities have regarded East Asia, the Pacific Rim and Basin, and Pacific Islands as a collective "Asia-Pacific" through geocultural understandings formed in relation to Cold War ideologies. This was namely through utopic fantasies of the liberal market (Wilson, 2000). Defining the region as such involved the narrative power of global hegemonies revealing "their underlying motivations in their search for a regional construct that is most consistent with the particular interest and perceptions of their purveyors (Dirlik, 1992).

The entities espousing blue geopolitics and blue geoeconomics indicate their blue geocultures; that is, their sense of place in the Pacific and what its future should look like. I refer to collective forces upholding and extending uneven forms of power through the rhetoric of blue ocean materiality as *blue hegemonies*. Blue hegemonies are reproduced in the geopolitical discourses alongside the proliferation of "blue economy" and "blue growth" development paradigms (hereafter referred to as Blue Economy/Growth). Blue Economy/Growth is derived from longstanding discourses of green economy, a Western-mediated framework which legitimized neoliberal market approaches to sustainable land-centric technologies and "clean" energy modernization while masking green colonialism (Ajl, 2021; Blanc, 2022). Under the guise of "One Guam, Green Guam" discourse, former US president Barack Obama visited Guåhan in 2010 with the broader goal of rallying support for a plan to relocate 8,600 Marines from

Okinawa to Guåhan and expand military training infrastructure on the island (Kirk and Natividad 2010).¹

Blue Economy/Growth similarly use the language of conservation and environmentalism to advance ecological modernization but obscure the frontier ideology underpinning exploitation of oceanic natural resources (Childs, 2019) and concurrent militarization. Native Pacific Islander scholars refer to this process as blue-washing (Arriola, 2023; Na’Puti and Frain, 2023; Perez, 2023). Blue-washing involves governments’ use of marine protection to obscure environmental harms and more-than-human displacements caused by the installation of military bases while exploiting oceanic resources for profit (Na’Puti and Frain, 2023). Blue-washing is conservation-as-control in a system where sustainability is “increasingly colonized by our marketized public sphere” (Perry, 2018, p. 9).² This is a central feature of contemporary US engagement in the Pacific, and it undergirds the broader US geocultural legacy, or the “teleology of continentalist politics” (Waligora-Davis, 2017, p. 194) narrativizing its place in the world: the frontier myth of Manifest Destiny masks its heritage of settler colonialism and the ongoingness of imperial expansionism.

The US has long thought of itself as a Pacific nation (Wallis et al., 2024). Today, its use of blue discourses is couched in the Western-mediated political framework of the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP), reflecting a militarist-capitalist orientation for containing the so-called “China Threat.” In 2019, the US Assistant Secretary for Insular and International Affairs at the Interior Department stated, “the US has been a Pacific

¹ This style of “green grabbing” (Fairhead et al 2012) is ongoing; in December 2024, transference of an additional 4,000 Marines from Okinawa to Guåhan was announced under the Biden administration to uphold a US-Japan agreement signed twelve years prior. 5,000 Marines are expected to be relocated to other bases, ports, and maritime patrols including some in Hawai`i and Australia. Thus, it is not only a matter of green grabbing/land grabbing, but also blue grabbing/water grabbing (Leonard et al 2023).

² Blue-washing also occurs at epistemic and intellectual levels. Some critical strands of scholarship such as new materialism, posthumanism, critical ocean studies, and blue humanities too often repackage Indigenous histories and concepts as novel or new. See Hokowhitu, 2021; Kibler, 2022; Magnat, 2022; Perez, 2020; Ravenscroft, 2018; Rosiek et al, 2020; Serra Undurraga and Wyatt, 2024; Watts, 2013.

country for a long time...and yes, maybe we've been kind of focused in other areas, but the president's Indo-Pacific strategy started focusing people back on this region of the world" (Kesling, 2019). One of Joe Biden's first comments as US President to PRC President Xi Jinping was his resolve to "preserving a free and open Indo-Pacific" (Jackson, 2021). Biden's comments reflect a FOIP strategy introduced under Trump to directly counter potential Sinocentric hegemony in the region (Heiduck and Wacker, 2020; Lyn, 2020). The US Indo-Pacific Strategy (The White House, 2022) clarifies the pursuit and strengthening of multi-lateral partnerships that affirm mutual vested interests in the region to shore up the US oceanic security state (Na'Puti and Frain, 2023), an extension of the historical settler frontier.

These partnerships are based on models of diplomacy that emerged during post WW-II development regimes, such as the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), a multi-national forum with UN-observer status. The US Indo-Pacific Strategy is spatially fixed on coastal Pacific and Indian Ocean nations which it regards as allies or potential partners. Harvey (2001) describes spatial fix as the capitalist tendency to remake spaces to resolve capitalism's inner contradictions and crises of production and overaccumulation. The emergence of the "Indo-Pacific" has thus become world's "economic and strategic centre of gravity" (Köllner et al., 2022). The Indo-Pacific concept is layered in ambiguity due to several involved countries shaping their perceptions through situated geopolitical, geoeconomic, and geocultural engagements (Li and Jiang, 2023). Neither the "Asia-Pacific" nor the "Indo-Pacific" are self-evident world regions but are strategic spaces created through marketization and militarization of oceanic spaces (Köllner, 2021).

Curtailling the "Blue Dragon"

The multilateral partnerships conceived within the FOIP framework are broadly formed in response to the perceived "China Threat" (Grydehøj et al., 2020; Machida, 2010; Ping, 2023). Thus, China considers the FOIP to be a "containment strategy

against Beijing” (Heiduck and Wacker, 2020, p. 5). As a matter of space, my focus on topics like PRC’s imperial engagements, militarism, or forms of state capitalism in the Pacific are limited here in this article. Having established that diplomatic engagements are contextualized within particular geocultural heritages and expressions of geocultural power, the broader point I wish to make here is about how China’s blue discourses advancing narratives of partnership, but are challenged through blue counter-discourses by the US and fellow adherents to the FOIP framework. As Solomon Islands scholar Tarcisius Kabutaulaka (2010) argues, much of the language around China in the Pacific is patronizing and orientalist through rhetoric of a big, bad “Blue Dragon” (Henderson and Reilly, 2003; Khan, 2023; Lanteigne, 2012; Stone, 2010). Ikenberry (2016) metaphorizes US-China conflict as a battle between an eagle and a dragon, through which US military posturing is organized around a “containment policy” across the Pacific and anchored between the two “unsinkable aircraft carriers” of Sri Lanka and Taiwan (Khan, 2023).

Since the announcement of the BRI, increased attention has been given attention to its expansion across archipelagic and oceanic spaces. As the PRC State Council (2023a) has noted, “the ocean is vast because it admits all rivers.” Referring to the current century as “the century of oceans,” the PRC’s State Oceanic Administration (SOA) states, “the status of oceans in national development dominates more than in any other period of human history” (quoted in Duchâtel and Duplaix, 2018, p. 3). Beijing is “promoting blue cooperation along the Silk Road” (Consulate General PRC, 2023). Among its objectives is forging a “Blue Engine” for sustainable development by implementing “the plan to jointly build and share maritime public services along the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road” and “supporting the basic maritime capacity for developing countries of the building of Belt and Road cooperation” (Consulate General PRC, 2023). “Blue partnerships” would share collected resources and knowledge around ocean and maritime issues, highlighting South-South cooperation and collaborative

action towards sustainable development, ultimately positioning China as a friend and cooperator with all countries which share the values of ocean conservation and “building a blue homeland for BRI partner countries” (Consulate General PRC, 2023).

The PRC State Council (2023b) states that “the BRI is a public road open to all, not a path owned by any single party” and “has no intention of establishing military alliances.” While cast in terms of common destiny, interest, and development, Washington views these engagements “as part of efforts to exclude the United States from the Indo-Pacific and build a new regional order emphasizing values of state sovereignty, collective order, and limited human rights and freedoms” (Lynch et al., 2020, p. 197). US blue discourses reactively bolster a multi-lateral securitization strategy within the context of the FOIP framework. Bilateral engagements remain important to the US, as with the recent renewal of the Compacts of Free Association (COFA) with the Freely Associated States of the FSM, Palau, and the Marshall Islands. The COFAs continues to “the bedrock of the US role in the Pacific” (Enlet, 2024). Compact negotiations were filled with remarks positioning the US as a universal force of peace, freedom, and stability in the region against a “threatening” and “aggressive” China. Meanwhile, the US has developed broader diplomatic ties around Blue Economy/Growth in the Pacific to more deeply entrench its hegemony against PRC influence.

Washington’s Blues

The Biden Administration initially distanced itself from the previous Trump administration’s initiatives due to their framings within right-wing populist nationalism, but one that it maintained is the Blue Dot Network (BDN).¹ The BDN was launched at a US-sponsored Indo-Pacific Business Forum held alongside the 35th ASEAN Summit in

¹ The network’s name is derived from astronomer Carl Sagan’s *Pale Blue Dot* (Goodman et al 2020), a work articulating a sense of shared, universal planetary vulnerability to advance an affinity for space sciences among Western publics.

2019. It was established as “rating agency” rather than a development project funding source. Under Trump, there was uncertainty as to whether the BDN was simply a symbolic gesture of competition with China’s BRI. From the start, there was a general sense of detached interest in developing regional infrastructure (Dongxiao et al 2020; McCawley 2019). Momentum was further stalled due to Covid-19, but the Biden administration announced a formal relationship with the OECD to certify infrastructure development projects that support free market trade in January 2021 (Borton, 2020). Despite gaining traction with institutional activity, neither the BDN nor the OECD have independent funding. Neither has authority for regulation or issuing loans, either: “Instead, the BDN is ‘selling’ a narrative and at the same time drawing upon its credibility and that of the OECD in terms of their capacity to make authoritative evaluations” (Ashbee, 2021, p. 141) on which development projects are approved.

Allegations of economic coercion are deployed by the US and its allies to enflame China Threat discourses. As US Democratic Senator Joe Manchin stated in a meeting about the renewal of the COFAs, “China has long been leveraging its economic power to undermine the autonomy of countries throughout the Pacific region by offering easy money, then applying coercive economic policies” (Manchin, 2022). The “coercive economic policies” to which Manchin refers are often called “debt traps” in political science and related literatures. Debt traps are loans designed to manufacture debts that island governments cannot repay, leading to loan default and Chinese government and bank ownership of ports or infrastructure (Davis et al 2020). The PRC’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is often associated with debt trap allegations (Solomon Islands Government Communication Unit Press 2023). But the US and its BDN are complicit in the same actions for which it accuses China and the BRI: demands for payment, imposition of sanctions, and debt traps (Nishizawa, 2023). The US Report on strategic alignment in the Indo-Pacific states, “prioritizing host country-led development activities that provide high-quality outcomes without *transactional caveats* sets the US

apart from the PRC. It also increases resilience and prosperity among nations in the Indo-Pacific region” (Committee on Foreign Relations 2023, italicization added). A central feature of US settler modernity is *debt imperialism*, a system which imposes financial indebtedness through neoliberal governance and emphasizes individual resilience in a disciplinary “payback” framework, even as the US’s own debts mount (Kim, 2022). This system is reinforced through the assemblage of military complexes that occupy Pacific waters, lands, and skies which, as “hard” power, involve their “soft” power capacities through cultural production US military and American Dream valorization.

Western economic institutions like the World Bank often point to the Solomon Islands as an example of bilateral BRI projects leading vulnerable nations into debt traps (Reuters 2022). This is dismissed by the PRC and Solomon Islands as a propagandized discourse (Solomon Island Government Communication Press 2023). In 2023, the US reactively re-established an embassy in Honiara after a 30-year absence to promote its FOIP concept “where democracy can flourish,” according to US Secretary of State Antony Blinken (Piringi, 2023). The reactionary nature of such US gestures, through frameworks like FOIP and projects like the BDN, emerge when it perceives its hegemony to be threatened and uses geocultural diplomacy to veil imperialist objectives and machinations (Davis, 2015). Soft power resources are used in tandem with technologies of environmental and racial violence to sustain the settler cultural ideology of US property and possession (Moreton-Robinson, 2015). This is evidenced by the treatment of the Pacific as a frontier space for US military adventurism (Diaz, 2019b), “militourism” (DeLisle, 2016), and (re)buildup of military bases and airfields which disregard local concerns of environmental degradation, loss and disconnection from ancestral lands (Arriola, 2020; Cagurangan, 2023; Perez, 2023; Wright, 2024).

Another blue initiative is the multilateral partnership between the US, Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand, Japan and the U.K. called Partners in the Blue Pacific (PBP). The

Biden administration states that the goal of this partnership is to follow the lead of Pacific Islands partners such as the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) and its vision of the Blue Pacific Continent (BPC) towards foregrounding the climate crisis through multilateral engagements (Kritenbrink, 2023). However, highlighting the strategic importance of the Compact Agreements, the PBP also extends the reach of US militarization outside that which is allowable by the Compact Agreements. The PBP infused funding into International Military Education and Training (IMET) for Fiji, Tonga, and Papua New Guinea which, according to the Biden administration, helps “build enduring ties between our security forces and train future Pacific Island security force leaders” (The White House, 2023). Similarly, the proposed House Resolution 2971 “Boosting Long-term US Engagement BLUE in the Pacific” (BLUE Pacific Act) seeks to deepen US engagements across the Pacific through expanding mechanisms such as International Law Enforcement Academies (H.R. 2967).

The US military’s use of Blue Pacific presents a particular vision of the Pacific: like the discourse of Pacific regions as “American Lakes,” the Blue Pacific discursively encloses and demarcates certain spaces as US-allied or outright American, whether in the form of military bases, territory, or as blue technofrontiers. This is not merely metaphorical. In 2023, the US extended its continental shelf off the coast of Alaska in the Pacific and Arctic Oceans and Bering Sea, claiming a million square miles worth of offshore territory near Russia (Ruskin, 2023). Such extensions historically involve offshore mineral extraction, military patrol, and the development of industry to sustain bases (Black, 2018), revealing inextricable links between blue economy and blue imperialism. Amid such challenges, member states of the PIF are cohering pan-Pacific regionalism into a different Blue Pacific discourse: the figure of the Blue Pacific Continent (BPC). The emergent formation of the BPC signals how “cultural interaction at the frontiers has contributed to the making of core cultures themselves – and a new

appreciation of the ways in which political margins can be turned into cultural counter-cores” (Wigen, 1999, p. 1198).

The Pacific Islands Forum and Oceanic Continentalization

I-Kiribati and African American scholar and poet Teresia Teaiwa (2022[2007]) once wrote that “continents, metaphysically speaking, do not exist” (p. 127). To meet contemporary challenges, the PIF has offered the BPC as a counternarrative to perspectives rendering the Pacific through narratives of spatialized abstraction. Regional rhetoric “is not merely about regions” but is a forum to debate pasts and envision futures (Wigen, 1999, p. 1193). While the nation-state is a resultant formation of colonialism, peoples of the Pacific “mobilize custom to criticize the state” (Chappell, 2016, p. 21). Jolly (2019) elaborates:

When introduced technocratic and bureaucratic ways of knowledge and practice rub up against such local modalities of knowing, the result is often ‘friction’. But Pacific peoples also evince an ‘adept skill in appropriating external interests or discourses ... and then turning them into home-grown initiatives’ (p. 185, referencing Tsing, 2005).

BPC discourse emerged from meetings of the PIF, a diplomatic assemblage of 18 regional countries and territories which discuss pertinent Pacific affairs while fostering “collaboration and cooperation in the pursuit of shared goals” (Pacific Islands Forum, 2024). The BPC is an affinity-based discourse across Pacific Island polities which territorializes island polities through the figure of continent.

BPC discourse invokes the ethos of Tongan anthropologist Epeli Hau’ofa’s (2008) affinity politics from *Our Sea of Islands*, the now famous treatise on the relational ontologies of oceanic connection. The 2017 PIF meetings highlighted self-determination principles under the theme “Blue Pacific: Our Sea of Islands” while another recent meeting referred to the Pacific as “the World’s largest continent” (Bainimarama, 2021). Pacific Island states perceive the greatest threat facing not only the Pacific but the world

to be the climate crisis. The 2018 PIF meetings in Nauru saw the signing of the Boe Declaration on regional security which “affirmed that the concept of ‘security’ implied not only traditional security but also environmental security and human security” (Pizzol and Pelaggi, 2023, p. 453). As Fry (2019) states, “This new framing of the region as solidly connected large ocean states with strategic weight and a determination to ensure indigenous control of the regional agenda has been expressed clearly in the fundamental transformation of the regional architecture” (p. 302). The 2022 meeting inaugurated Phase I of the PIF’s implementation plan for the *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent*. A communiqué from the meeting states, “Leaders recognised the opportunity of The Blue Pacific Narrative to reinforce the potential of its shared stewardship of the Pacific Ocean and to reaffirm the connections of Pacific peoples with their natural resources, environment, culture and livelihoods” (Pacific Islands Forum, 2022).

At the 2023 meetings, leaders specified their role in “forewarning the world on the existential threats of the climate crisis,” (Pacific Islands Forum, 2023b) seeking also to enshrine the BPC through legal structures which ensure environmental standards and protect those affected by sea-level rise now and in perpetuity (Pacific Islands Forum, 2023a). The political, legal, scientific, and economic structures necessary for developing sustainable futures in the Pacific must emerge, as one sustainable development expert to the conference noted, from “a deep understanding of Pacific peoples, cultures, behaviours, and ways of knowing.” As the event’s keynote speaker, Tuvalu Minister of Justice Simon Kofe, stated, “our discourse is not limited to legal instruments and policies, but encompasses the survival of our people and nations” (Pacific Islands Forum, 2023b). This view contrasts that which Matapo (2017) calls the “majorative,” or universalized Western human subject which “stems historically from the great chain of being anchored in patriarchal structures and ideology...in a particular hierarchical order” (p. 3). In Native Pacific ontologies, by contrast, conceptions of individual “selves”

are relational and emerge from the cosmogenesis of place: “Pacific peoples are not individuals; there is a shared divinity with ancestors – including the waters, land and skies, all integral parts of the cosmos” (Matapo, 2017, p. 7). Pacific regionalism has been instrumental in narrativizing Pacific geocultural power and centering Pacific lifeways to assert direction in enduring the climate crisis and maintaining a livable planet.

Re-envisioning the Pacific through the landed language of the continent is, at one level, seemingly incongruent with Teaiwa’s statement that continents do not metaphysically exist; Na’puti and Frain (2023) state that Indigenous oceanic knowledge systems are “not exclusively tied to land (or distance from it) or control” (p. 119). However, it shows that all land, globally speaking, is *already* islands. In this way, the BPC can be regarded as a form of islanding through inversion of colonial and imperial power dynamics that have continuously (de/re)territorialized the Pacific for outside purposes. While it is a cogent rhetorical strategy within diplomatic processes, the question of its cultural circulation throughout communities in the Pacific remains. It should also be noted that this form of Pacific regionalism represents an elite regionalism and does not necessarily reflect liberatory regionalisms emerging from Pacific community, local ecological knowledges (Demeulenaere et al, 2021; Diawara, 2000; Diaz, 2019a; 2019b; Kabutaulaka, 2021), or climate activism (Fair, 2020; Kim et al, 2023; Teaiwa, 2018). Additionally, the PIF has historically elided certain island polities and peoples from its continentalist formulation. As Kwara’ae and Lau (Solomon Islands) scholar David Gegeo (2001) wrote of the “Pacific Way” (an earlier institutionalized iteration of pan-Pacific identity):

A Pacific voice raises new questions. Are we going to develop a single Pacific voice? Or an umbrella sort of voice that embraces a multiplicity of Pacific voices? Surely it must be the second. To opt for a single voice simply replaces one hegemony with another and repeats our colonial experience (p. 182).

It is not uncommon for Pacific Islander scholars to use identifications such as “Pacific,” “Pasifika,” “Moana,” and “Moana-Oceania” interchangeably in ways that “acknowledge the diffuse terms that Pacific Islanders use to refer to our ocean, nations, region, and part of the world” while “acknowledging the diversity of realities that exist within our region without intending to collapse this under one label” (Thomsen et al, 2022:247). However, when holding the PIF’s “Pacific voice” under the scrutiny of its praxis in disregarding Micronesian states’ voices and concerns, it raises questions of which voices speak for the Pacific. This rift highlights the fact that Pacific Island nations are not monolithic and often “do not speak as a single voice on many issues” (Shibuya, 2022, p. 45).

Micronesia’s Place in the Blue Pacific Continent

Despite movements toward inclusion in diplomatic representation, recent PIF history is fraught by the extension of hegemonies from Polynesia and Melanesia. This emerged only months prior to the 2021 virtual leaders meeting when former Cook Islands Prime Minister Henry Puna was elected secretary-general. The last time a Micronesian held the post was between 1992 and 1998 under former Kiribati president Ieremia Tabai. Prior to the 2021 election, there was a “gentleman’s agreement” that would have installed a Micronesian leader of the PIF.¹ For Micronesian leaders, the election of Puna signified disrespect to Micronesia and the “Pacific Way of doing things” (Hasenkamp, 2021). The decision was followed by accusations suggesting Australia and New Zealand denied the agreement to install a Micronesian candidate as Forum leader and re-ignited concerns over western moderation of the PIF (Sen and Howes 2023). Soon after the decision, Palau announced its withdrawal from the PIF. The remaining Micronesian member states – the FSM, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, and Nauru – soon

¹ Teaiwa et al (2021) argue that the claim of a gentleman’s agreement violation indicates how, even in matrilineal societies, patriarchal cultural formations circulate through “Indigenous forms of inequality along gendered, classed, and sexual lines.”

followed (Puas, 2022b). After reforms to the leadership selection were promised, the states later rejoined.

In peripheralizing contexts such as this, FSM leaders necessarily engage with discourses like Blue Economy/Growth to assert sustainability-centered national identity from within its precarious position “in the process of accumulation on a world scale” (Ajl, 2023, p.17). In a 2012 address to the UN General Assembly, former FSM president Emanuel “Manny” Mori” stated, “[O]ur livelihood, our economy, our culture and our way of living are tied to a blue economy” (Mori, 2012). Mori’s statement is underwritten by a quality beyond political economy. It involves involving characteristics of place and culture, or geoculture, in forming national narrative and identity tied to political economy but not subordinated to it. However, contemporary debates about Micronesia’s place in the Pacific continue to be framed in terms of blue power competition between the US and their cultural influences in the region (Donaldson, 2021). FSM leadership broadly attribute “peacekeeper” characteristics to the nation (Cagurangan, 2024). Pizzol and Pelaggi (2023) state that Pacific nations tend to “reject the logic of China–US competition that underscores the idea that smaller states are to be treated as objects of great power rivalry” and that “China’s increasing presence is generally viewed with optimism” (p. 453) as a potential partner in political and economic engagement. Chuukese scholar Gonzaga Puas (2022a) notes that “many Pacific scholars are critical of the fear mongering against China. They question whether this recent China-phobia is real, imagined, or somehow exaggerated” (pp. 1-2).

These tensions point to ways in which BPC nations like the FSM invoke geocultural heritage to face the world’s greatest threat, the climate crisis. Climate breakdown poses threats beyond geopolitical security to that of “genuine security” (Na’Puti and Frain, 2023) for the more-than-human environment. Puas (2023) cautions foreign governments and transnational institutions engaging in FSM development that tying climate change adaptation and mitigation funding to political imperatives risks a

fallout in relations. The model of engagement thus far has seen imperial hegemons “relating to the Blue Pacific region in ways that only bring it greater insecurity while proclaiming precisely the opposite” (Jackson, 2024, p. 6). As such, “the United States, Taiwan, China and other like-minded countries should be mindful of the clearly articulated needs and objectives of the FSM Government and adjust their aid and development interactions accordingly” (Puas, 2023, p. 205).

In this spirit, Inomata and Abe (2024) advocate for *Micronesian* regionalism which could be useful in advocating localized interests within PIF and broader international relations. Appreciating “interconnected, hybrid networked types of knowledge and awareness embodied in islands and Islander histories” (Dvorak, 2011, p. 238) beyond metrocentric centers of global capital can be mobilized towards developing liberatory social and environmental politics (Coleman and Rosenow, 2023; Corntassel and Woons, 2017; Shilliam, 2011). Geoculturally, foundations toward this idea were laid during the process of the cohering “Micronesia” into a nation-state entity. Those tasked with political navigation of inscribing emerging national consciousness into codified documents and systems drew upon rich historical traditions of seafaring and being-in-place. The FSM Constitution is imbued with such geocultural power, resembling what Kersten (2023) calls ecological constitutionalism. The preamble (FSM, 1979) states:

Micronesia began in the days when man explored seas in rafts and canoes. The Micronesian nation is born in an age when men voyage among stars; our world itself is an island.¹ We extend to all nations what we seek from each: peace, friendship, cooperation, and love in our common humanity. With this

¹ Exobiologists (biologists who study life beyond Earth) often invoke sociotechnical imaginaries of planets as islands and outer space as ocean (Webb, 2021). For example, a NASA publication titled *This Island Earth* likened the 1969 Moon landing to the experience of paddling a dugout canoe to explore an offshore island (Webb 2021, p. 392).

Constitution we, who have been the wards of other nations, become the proud guardian of our own islands, now and forever.

Here, the FSM mobilizes cultural cosmology linking land, waters, skies, and stars in national identity formation while critiquing the legacy of colonial state-wardship. The inclusion of place relations and cultural mobilities indicate usage of the nation-state form as a technology of cultural continuity (Puas, 2021).

While the PIF draws upon Hau'ofian "sea of islands" world enlargement in the form of the BPC, historical elision of Micronesia from meaningful engagement in the Forum circumvents collective expansiveness. Diaz (2019b) cautions that to simply "hitch a ride on Hau ' ofian expansiveness" (p. 34) without "*scaling back* to appropriate locale and place depth" (2018, p. 10, italicization in original) perpetuates Native Pacific epistemological and ontological tokenization and subjugation. This can occur even within regionalized frameworks. Diaz (2018; 2019b) argues that Hau'ofa's use of "sea" rather than "ocean" is not an idle choice: it *contracts* the notion of oceanic world enlargement to mobilize "expanded Indigenous possibilities" (2018, p. 10). The use of sea, and not ocean, in the FSM Constitution's preamble is just as significant. However, its use of "man" as a reference to universal personhood is a reminder that the process of contraction should also scale back to the locale of the body as a consideration of the differential regulations of gender identity and sexuality in governance and hegemonic social relations (Teaiwa et al 2021). As histories of Micronesian continuity have shown, the region's place in regional and global configurations will come from scaling back to appropriate locale and place depth – wherever Micronesians are – because that is where Micronesia's geocultural power emerges from.

Conclusion

As global crises enfold into one another, hegemonic politics “is about waging struggles on multiple terrains at once” (Paret and Levenson, 2024, p. 20). This article argued that dominant frameworks of geopolitics and geoeconomics often present hegemonic politics in terms of self-evident political entities and abstracted economic flows. I argued the inclusion of geocultural analysis a useful lens or vocabulary for centering place and people in analyzing and narrativizing hegemonic struggle. Thinking geoculturally offers a relational understanding between space/place/environment/nature (*geo*) and people/polities (*culture*). This article examined circulations of blue discourse as revealing of states’ underlying geocultural legacies and how this contextualizes attempts to define Pacific futures through extending their blue hegemony in conceptual space(s) and material place(s).

Blue hegemonies draw upon oceanic symbolism either as an abstract space of resource extraction and imperial expansionism or as a material body of life-sustaining connection (George and Wiebe 2020). While global hegemons’ discourses of oceanic connection aim to secure strategic geopolitical and geoeconomic advantages, politics in the Pacific have “appropriated imperial literacies to express diverse Indigenous concepts” (Mar, 2019, p. 64) like the continentalist formation of the BPC. However, regional formations also involve hegemonic circulations. Attunement to confluences of geocultural power in the Pacific will be critical in an era where a multiplicity of human-induced ecological crises form a broader planetary climate crisis. This is especially relevant in Pacific places where rising seas, coastal erosion, and inland flooding give a new meaning to oceanic expansiveness (DeLoughrey, 2018). Blue hegemonies will become more deeply entrenched as ways of imagining and producing different Pacific futures, particularly in relation to the blue spatial fix of the “new Cold War” between the US and China. Contracting oceanic imaginaries to localized geocultural contexts holds potential for more liberatory politics to ensure specific needs of Pacific peoples are not awash and adrift in hegemonic formations of expansiveness.

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