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Oceanic cosmopolitanism: the complexity of waiting for future climate refugees

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ABSTRACT
Waiting may feel like wasted time for people inhabiting small, low-lying, and extremely vulnerable island states as they await rising sea levels. Their homes may soon become uninhabitable due to climate change. The interplay between accelerating natural hazards, an increasing number of climate refugees, and the lack of adequate international refugee protection can prolong their waiting time. Therefore, I examine this experience within the complexity of the waiting framework consisting of existential, legal, and natural waiting. I explore the negative implications of climate refugees' waiting and how such waiting may be prevented.

1. Introduction

Due to the negative impacts of accelerating planetary climate changes such as rising sea levels, people inhabiting small, low-lying, and extremely vulnerable island states (e.g. Tuvalu) may be subjected to waiting while their homes become uninhabitable. Although the concept is contested, I believe these islanders can be defined as climate refugees. This term might be defined as people who 'leave their habitats, immediately or in the near future, because of sudden or gradual alterations in their natural environment' (Biermann and Boas 2010, 67). Moreover, temporarily or permanently, they choose or are forced to leave their surroundings (Luetz and Merson 2019, 4). The number of climate refugees is constantly rising, and by 2050 there may be between 150 million and 1 billion globally (Faber and Schlegel 2017).

In contrast, the UN 1951 Refugee Convention (hereafter abbreviated as the Refugee Convention)—which is one of the main instruments of international refugee law—excludes climate refugees as genuine refugees. The interplay between accelerating climate change, an increasing number of climate refugees, and the lack of adequate international refugee protection makes it difficult to find permanent solutions and prolongs their waiting time. Therefore, in this article, I examine the negative implications of climate refugees' waiting and how such waiting may be prevented.

I explore this issue within the anthropologist Ghassan Hage's framework of the 'complexity of waiting' (2009, 3). This term indicates that waiting takes place in multiple and

overlapping ways. I apply the framework by assuming an interconnection between what Hage defines as existential, legal, and natural waiting. Although these waiting forms are distinct from each other, the negative implications of existential waiting are partly initiated by legal waiting through, for example, the Refugee Convention's exclusion of climate refugees and so a lack of the latter framework may worsen the former situation. However, the negative implications of both existential and legal waiting seem to be created partly within the wider context of natural waiting. By the latter, I mean the waiting related to the emerging geological epoch of the Anthropocene (e.g. the acceleration of rising sea levels due to climate change). Further, existential and legal waiting should be studied in the context of natural waiting since climate change and other main drivers behind the latter partly drive the former too.

The intended contribution of this paper is to investigate these three different but interrelated waiting forms constituting the framework of the complexity of waiting one by one. By doing so, through an interdisciplinary approach, I want to highlight how various levels— that is, the micro level of existential waiting, the meso level of legal waiting, and the macro level of natural waiting—should be taken into consideration as parts of the same picture when investigating the issue of climate refugees. In Section 2, I explore the issue of future climate refugees' existential waiting. Against the backdrop of the feminist theorist Martha Albertson Fineman, I suggest that the negative implications of such waiting (e.g. meaning loss) in the instance of inhabitants of small island states can be better tackled by recognizing their shared bodily vulnerability. I recognize these inhabitants as 'moral addressees' who are affected parties through their injurability. In Section 3, I explore the matter of legal waiting of climate refugees. Inspired by the legal theorist Anna Grear, I conceptualize what I define as legal ecocentrism. I attempt to show why reforming the Refugee Convention by including climate refugees should be based on an ecocentric understanding of nonhuman nature and may be a more suitable way to handle the negative implications of such waiting (e.g. displacement). I also connect legal ecocentrism to the discourse on the ethics of migration. In contrast to what I understand as philosopher Serena Parekh's standpoint, I believe that one should expand our approach to refugee issues beyond what Grear criticizes as juridical anthropocentrism. Finally in Section 4, I parse climate refugees' natural waiting. I highlight how the negative implications of such waiting can result in an othering of climate refugees that seems to be based on an ontological dualism. In contrast to this and building on the ontological holism of Val Plumwood's eco-feminist ethics, I propose that natural waiting can be better handled by the moral idea of an oceanic cosmopolitanism from below. Residents of small island states might thereby counter natural waiting by gradually raising their voices in the global discourse on climate refugees.

By including Indigenous Island voices, I wish to show how a mutual and symmetric communicative action (rather than just speaking about it) might be practiced in the domains I discuss. I am trained as a philosopher from the West, with the constraints that come along with that. Nonetheless, I situate this paper in non-Western contexts by exploring small islands states (e.g. in the Pacific) and argue for an oceanic cosmopolitanism instead of a Western cosmopolitanism to better understand the interplay between climate change and climate refugees. Subsequently, I wish to move in a post-colonial direction, more than what I thus far have found in philosophical literature on the same subject as mine. Based on oceanic cosmopolitanism, one may consider the issue of climate refugees from the outlook of people's actual waiting experiences and struggles

for recognition. In turn, these people might strengthen their own awareness-raising, adaptation capacities, and migration preparedness even in cases where they are often most affected by natural hazards.

2. Existential waiting

As part of the complexity of the waiting framework, Hage explains that existential waiting 'sends us on an endless search for the meaning of life.' This search 'makes us wait for the moment where [this] waiting ends.' However, if such a moment never occurs, existential waiting may imply 'meaninglessness and purposelessness.' Then, the search can appear as a 'waste of time.' (2009, 5).

I argue that Hage's concept of existential waiting might highlight the subjective experiences of waiting in the case of future climate refugees, who experience feelings of uncertainty and unpredictability while waiting for tomorrow's existential impacts of today's climate change. People in small, low-lying island states may be exposed to existential waiting, especially due to climate change-induced rising sea levels that may make these islands uninhabitable. Then, the everyday contexts (e.g. family, school, or work) within which people might search for a meaningful life will possibly—to a greater or lesser extent, and for a shorter or longer period—be undermined (Faber and Schlegel 2017, 6). Their search for meaning can thereby be experienced as wasted time since the everyday contexts within which existential waiting takes place might be transformed or cease to be.

Relatedly, in the chapter titled 'Waiting for Global Warming' in Hage's edited volume *Waiting*—in which Hage himself introduces his idea of the complexity of waiting—another anthropologist, Hans A. Baer, introduces three 'forms of waiting' related to climate change: First, waiting on 'governments and global governance bodies … to take action' (e.g. policymaking) (Baer 2009, 136); second, waiting for 'ordinary people to be part of the process of implementing social change' (e.g. grassroots environmental movements) (137). As I interpret Baer, these two waiting forms elucidate the dynamic between existential waiting and prospective climate refugees. In small, low-lying, and increasingly uninhabitable island states—pending climate change initiatives from governments and NGOs—the resident's everyday frameworks in which they seek meaning can even be further harmed. If so, their loss of existential meaning will continue. I find Baer's third and final waiting form even more appropriate regarding the interplay between existential waiting and climate refugees: the 'waiting on the global warming to unravel as part and parcel of a *larger ecological crisis* that includes the depletion of resources (such as oil, water, forests) and numerous forms of pollution' (139, emphasis added), Baer here refers to the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), whose aim is to provide scientific knowledge and political responses to tackle climate change globally. The IPCC documents that it is '95 percent certain' that 'humans are the main cause' of climate change. Additionally, 'the more human activities disrupt the climate, the greater the risks of *severe, pervasive and irreversible* impacts for *people and ecosystems*, and *long-lasting* changes in *all components* of the climate system' (2014, v, emphasis added).

Climate change thus impacts the entire Earth system (Dryzek and Pickering 2019). These risks are further linked to ecological footprints, which measure humans'

consumption of nature (i.e. the quantity of the natural resources it takes to support humanity). Climate change is also connected to overexploitation, overpopulation, over-consumption, overshoot, feedback loops, and tipping points (Vetlesen 2015). The IPCC concludes that today's planetary environmental crisis requires an 'urgent and fundamental departure from business as usual.' If not, the 'longer [one] wait[s] to take action, the more it will cost and the greater the … challenges [one] will face' (2014, v).

In my reading, Baer's linking of waiting to the larger ecological crisis documented by the IPCC can be related to the existential waiting of populations in small, low-lying island states. Despite contributing exceedingly little to the climate crisis and its drivers (UN 2010, 5), it can be argued that the residents of such places are often both physically and mentally at the frontline of the negative effects of climate change and are more directly affected by planetary climate change. These people might thus—to a greater extent than many others—experience meaninglessness while searching for existential meaning because the everyday contexts within which this search is situated can be harmed or even soon cease to be due to rising sea levels.

2.1. Shared vulnerability

Based on their local knowledge, the UN categorizes many of these island states as '*extremely* vulnerable' (UN 2010, 5, emphasis added). The reason is that people in these locations live in coastal zones at low elevations, and such zones represent contiguous areas along the coast that are less than ten meters above sea level. Their extreme vulnerability is caused by climate change-induced rising sea levels, storm surges, floods, and other natural disasters. Moreover, their vulnerability is shaped by these island states' limited mitigation and adaptation potential to climate change effects. This is due to their 'small size, narrow resource base, high susceptibility to natural degradation, low economic resilience, and limited human and technological capacity.' In this scenario, these island states 'will become *uninhabitable*' in only a few decades through their extreme vulnerability. Although the UN does not give a detailed account of what uninhabitable means in this context, it is nonetheless underscored that this could imply that a 'large share of the population' of such islands 'will be *displaced* or otherwise adversely impacted' (UN 2010, 5, emphasis added).

Based on the UN's concept of extreme vulnerability, I believe that populations of increasingly uninhabitable island states and their physical vulnerability to existential waiting reinforce each other. Perhaps the main driver here, too, is the damage caused by climate change (e.g. rising sea levels) to the everyday lives within which their search for meaning usually happens. I argue that the feminist-philosophical discourse on vulnerability can enrich the UN's concept of extreme vulnerability regarding climate change and future climate refugees. Fineman here defines vulnerability as something ontologically 'shared', that is, a 'human condition' (2008, 12), Vulnerability is thereby both universal and concrete: It is universal by being 'constant' and 'inherent' in the human condition (1), whereas vulnerability is concrete by being 'experienced uniquely' by each person (10). Further, vulnerability is 'arising from our embodiment.' which hinges on an 'ever-present possibility of harm, injury, and misfortune' (9). This includes harm from 'mildly adverse to catastrophically devastating events, whether accidental, intentional, or otherwise' (9), such as climate change. Vulnerability also generates 'the ever-constant

possibility of dependency' (9), which is 'episodic, sporadic, and largely developmental' (9, note 25).

Building on these insights, I posit that vulnerability is both ontologically the ground for and temporally prior to autonomy. By recognizing our vulnerability, one experiences that all humans may be exposed to this condition, such as through disability, illness, and mortality, throughout our lives—to a greater or lesser extent and for a shorter or longer period. Nonetheless, one may gradually become autonomous through mutual relationships of each other's recognition. To humans, then, vulnerability may be seen as something enabling rather than victimizing or related to weakness. Due to this account of *relational autonomy* (Lysaker 2020a), one most certainly will not stay autonomous in the traditional sense of this term throughout our lifespan.

There is a connection between the extreme vulnerability of future climate refugees (e.g. the loss of contexts within which they may live meaningful lives) and their shared vulnerability. Ontologically, the former presupposes the latter; their extreme vulnerability is a concrete variant of the over-all condition of shared human vulnerability. Thus, these refugees' extreme vulnerability should be recognized due its foundational character and thereby attempts should be made to prevent existential waiting for these people.

2.2. Moral addressee

The above alternative idea of autonomy as relational can be taken one step further by characterizing humans as recognition- and relation-dependent *addressees* rather than individually autonomously recognizing and acting agents. Truly, 'addressees need not be agents' (Vetlesen 2015, 144). Rather, to be an addressee, morally, means that you are bodily, perceptually, and sensibly a recipient of the existence and engagements of others. Thus, addressees constitute asymmetric yet mutual relationships in which they morally engage in terms of empathy, care, and responsibility (Lysaker 2020a).

I argue that this vulnerability-based idea of being a moral addressee should be extended to nonhuman nature (Lysaker 2020b). I here have in mind the notion of *ecocentrism*, that is, the attribution of moral value to such entities as the ecosphere, which comprises all the Earth's ecosystems (Rowe 1994). It is important, therefore, to recall that not only human nature but also nonhuman nature—what the IPCC refers to as all the components of the Earth system (i.e. the atmosphere, the hydrosphere, the lithosphere, and the biosphere)—might be affected by the risks of severe, pervasive, irreversible, and long-lasting impacts of human-made climate change. Considering this, ecocentrism may, to a greater degree than anthropocentrism (i.e. human-centrism, which morally ranks human nature above nonhuman nature), shed light on the issue of future climate refugees' existential waiting. This is because ecocentrism broadens our outlook regarding possible drivers of existential waiting. Instead of viewing such waiting as merely caused by individual or human factors (e.g. meaning loss), ecocentrism approaches existential waiting through structural and natural factors, for example, climate change-induced rising sea levels.

Against this broader ecocentric approach to drivers of existential waiting, I believe our shared vulnerability shows that humans can no longer be perceived as autonomous agents operating exclusively within narrowly conceived human contexts. Instead, as vulnerable beings, one needs to acknowledge our dependence on and mutual relationships

with natural resources. However, these resources are objectively limited and over-exploited by humans (IPCC 2014, 13). When exploring the existential waiting of prospective climate refugees, one should, to a greater extent than is the case today, consider the mutual dependency between human and nonhuman nature. Based on our common vulnerability and injurability, for example, concerning climate change, both human and non-human nature seem to share the characterization of deserving protection as moral addressees, even though they are also unique and different. I here think of the above-explained asymmetric yet mutual kind of relationship. Such an asymmetry means that humans are morally included as addressees without necessarily being agents. Similarly, nonhuman nature is involved in asymmetric yet mutual relationships: as mutually engaged with humans but asymmetrically, to a great degree, dependent on us. Thus, as an affected party—vis-à-vis, for example, human-made climate change—nonhuman nature partly depends on the protection of humans against such natural hazards. By being both an affected party and a moral addressee with relational autonomy, humans should care for nonhuman nature, too. I believe that this asymmetric yet mutual relationship between human and nonhuman nature constitutes a moral demand, which requires, for example, that the existential waiting time of future climate refugees is reduced to a minimum rather than being prolonged. To the degree to which inhabitants of small island states are extremely vulnerable—which is grounded in a shared vulnerability—and thus exposed to existential waiting, one should seek to decrease such waiting by developing more stable everyday lives within which existential meaning may be created.

I suggest that one significant way to counteract existential waiting as a moral addressee with relational autonomy is to depart from what the IPCC describes as business as usual (e.g. global capitalism's growth-driven exploitation of natural resources). Then, residents of small island states may strengthen their awareness-raising, adaptation capacities, and migration preparedness (Luetz and Merson 2019).

3. Legal waiting

Within the context of the complexity of waiting, Hage's concept of social waiting refers to 'politics' in circumstances within which someone has the 'power' to define 'how to organize waiting into a social system' (Hage 2009, 2). He looks at such waiting concerning 'who is to wait,' 'how to wait,' 'what waiting entails,' and 'who has the power to make their time appear more valuable than somebody else's time' (2). Furthermore, social waiting points to something legal since 'law … governs most social organisations' (2009a, 103). Subsequently, I interpret Hage's second kind of waiting as the power to organize legal waiting. To my mind, given that legal waiting takes place within various juridical contexts, this power may cause negative implications such as exclusion, exception, displacement, and limbo for potential climate refugees in vulnerable island states.

Regarding exclusion, it is worthwhile to highlight how legal power can induce negative impacts in the context of international legal frameworks. As mentioned, the current version of the Refugee Convention and the UN 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, the main instruments of international refugee law and protection, exclude climate refugees as a proper category of refugees. In the Refugee Convention, refugees are defined as people who are 'unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted.' This well-founded fear must be

based on 'race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion' (UN 1951, 3). However, this definition of a refugee does not directly cover the climate-related drivers behind today's transnational migration. The heart of the matter is that 'people fleeing their homes because of natural disasters or other environmental problems do *not qualify* for refugee status and the protection that come[s] from such status' (Lister 2014, 618, emphasis added).

The power of legal waiting might also generate state-based exceptions concerning how climate refugees are viewed:

> [A] sovereign *exception* [can] be made between 'legitimate' migrants on the one hand—that is, those who fit under the parameters of 'political persecution' (thus imposing upon UN signatory nations an obligation to allow them to enter their territory)—and, implicitly, a disposable population of '*irregular*' *migrants who do not deserve to be saved or assisted.* (McKee 2011, 319, emphasis added)

So, 'despite its appeal to a universal law pertaining to humanity in general' (319), the Refugee Convention appears to introduce an exception concerning whether climate refugees should be protected:

> [The Refugee Convention] not only inscribes a *division between two orders of protected and unprotected humanity*—privileging those exposed to 'exceptional' persecution while abandoning those who subsist in permanent states of emergency—but also lacks any binding force in its own right, leaving the interpretation of that division in the hands of the sovereign nation-states. (319, emphasis added)

In my opinion, whether climate refugees should be recognized as refugees deserving protection, the power of legal waiting echoes Giorgio Agamben's concept of a 'state of exception' (2005, 23). Agamben believes such an exception is 'neither external nor internal to the juridical order.' Rather, this exception creates a 'zone of indifference,' where 'inside and outside do not exclude each other but rather blur with each other' (23). To build further on this Agambenian idea regarding climate refugees, I raise the issue of whether extremely vulnerable island states, which soon might become uninhabitable, may qualify as such zones of indifference. In my view, inhabitants of these islands who might become climate refugees are simultaneously inside and outside. In principle, they are inside by being ascribed the moral and legal-political status of having human dignity and human rights; in reality, however, they are outside by being excluded from the Refugee Convention as genuine refugees requiring protection.

It can be further argued that such an Agambenian power mechanism may incite the legal power behind limbo and displacement. Linked to this aspect of legal waiting for future climate refugees, the UN Secretary-General has developed a relevant typology of climate-triggered displacement scenarios, subsequently adopted by the UN Inter-Agency Standing Committee Working Group on Migration/Displacement and Climate Change. Several of the suggested scenarios show that climate change and other natural hazards may imply that 'if areas become *uninhabitable* because of … sinking coastal zones, then population movements would amount to *forced displacement* and become *permanent*' (McAdam 2009, 160, emphasis added). Small island states are also '*at risk of disappearing* because of rising sea levels' (160, original emphasis). Thus, '*permanent relocation* to other states would be *necessary*' (160, emphasis added), in addition to intra-country relocations.

Although prospective climate refugees are currently not displaced or in limbo, one can say that they might already be waiting to become displaced or placed in limbo, which, partly, is due to the legal power behind the exclusion and exception of climate refugees by international refugee law instruments. Given that, I believe one should be aware of the possible negative reinforcement between international refugee law, arousing exclusion and exception, and the UN typology of climate-triggering displacement and limbo scenarios. Acknowledging the negative effect of legal waiting for future climate refugees may help build a more effective understanding of how these effects may avoided.

3.1. Ethics of waiting

Serena Parekh (2017, 14 note 2 and note 4, 40 note 1, 49 note 35, 66, 104, 124) only briefly mentions climate refugees. Still, I think that Parekh's 'ethics of the temporary' (2) can further illuminate the issue of legal waiting in view of the above-described climate-triggering displacement and limbo scenarios: 'Prolonged encampment and long-term displacement, which are in many circumstances the result of uncoordinated policies of various sovereign states each acting to preserve their 'communities of character,' are *never raised as moral issues*' (57, emphasis added). Here, Parekh addresses waiting and displacement by focusing on the 'moral dimension of how … [waiting refugees] are treated *between the time* of their exile and *when* they are finally able to find a *permanent durable* solution' (3, emphasis added). Accordingly, there is a moral obligation to ensure that they 'live *dignified* lives *while they are awaiting* a more permanent solution' (5, emphasis added). Parekh further maintains that refugees experiencing waiting in terms of displacement and limbo are subjected to two forms of 'harm,' which, according to her, are distinct forms that should be analyzed separately. First, 'moral' harm, which is an 'ontological deprivation,' that is, the 'loss of something fundamental to a person's humanity' (4-6) and second, 'legal/political' harm, namely the 'loss of a political community and a legal identity in the form of citizenship' (83).

Although Parekh focuses on people who have already been displaced and are awaiting a permanent solution, I find her perspective relevant to climate refugees who potentially can be displaced. In avoiding the negative effects of legal waiting, Parekh's ethics of migration asks us to heed the precautionary principle, to anticipate harm before it occurs. Being aware of similar future situations as those Parekh explores can help us identify cases where people already are or soon might be subjected to climate change's negative implications through legal waiting. Since existing international refugee law currently fails to acknowledge climate refugees, I suggest that one understand their displacement as already present. Additionally, what Parekh defines as the need to protect against moral and legal-political harm evidently fills the gap between the time of expected exile and permanent solutions even for future climate refugees. According to the figures I mentioned in the introduction, rising sea levels and other natural hazards are already taking place and will increasingly turn small, low-lying, extremely vulnerable island states into uninhabitable places during the next thirty years. It seems not just that they may, but it is certain that they must move if they cannot live there. This will most certainly lead to these people being forced to move and thereby become climate refugees.

Though I find Parekh's standpoint promising, I think its division between moral and legal-political harm is problematic. Here, because she counts moral harm and thus

morality linked to humanity, that is, human dignity, as something ontological, it seems to be perceived as more fundamental than legal-political harm. If so, I am not fully convinced that this moral-ontological level should—or even could—be disconnected from what Parekh seemingly defines as the less fundamental legal-political level. From my viewpoint, Parekh overlooks that these two moral and legal-political levels of harm may be interconnected rather than separated. In the UN 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in the very first sentence of the preamble—which constitutes the moral core of these rights (Habermas 2010)—it is stated that this declaration demands the 'recognition of the inherent dignity' of each human (UN 1948). Similarly, there exists a mutuality between the moral (i.e. human dignity) and the legal-political (i.e. human rights) in the Refugee Convention. This convention is grounded in Article 14 of the UN 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN 1951, 2). Thus, as Article 14 is morally based on this human rights declaration's grounding in human dignity, the Refugee Convention is also morally grounded in human dignity. I hold that the interconnection between the moral (i.e. human dignity) and the legal-political (i.e. human rights) (Habermas 2010) articulates a more robust grounding of an ethics of the temporary along with being closer to the original idea of both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Refugee Convention. Subsequently, I believe that what Parekh perceives as two distinct harms should count as a single yet more dehumanizing harm. This is because such harm might dehumanize in moral and legal-political terms simultaneously. To dehumanize, then, involves both violating the human dignity and human rights of others. In terms of future climate refugees, such a combination model of the moral and the legal-political seems better suited to identify various forms and impacts of legal waiting to which they might be exposed.

My combination thesis further argues that the concept of human dignity, as articulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, is too abstract to be applied in concrete contexts. So, regarding Parekh's point about living dignified lives while waiting, for example, future climate refugees might be awaiting a permanent solution concerning their legal waiting, I believe that one should define the concept of dignity more concretely to be able to judge whether these people are living dignified lives. Although the concept of dignity is contested, I propose that one continue building on Fineman's approach to vulnerability. To recall, vulnerability is a human condition that is both concrete and universal. Against the backdrop of our shared vulnerability, I hold that humans are bodily injurable and can herewith be harmed at this basic ontological level. The idea of dignity should, therefore, protect this bodily vulnerability. Given that, refusing to protect others' vulnerability is both morally and legal-politically wrong since it violates the person's bodily grounded dignity (Lysaker 2020a).

Related to the above discourse around the Refugee Convention—including its moral core of human dignity—as an adequate instrument for refugee protection today is the matter of whether this legal document should be reformed by including climate refugees. Such a reform could imply several things. First, a reform may expand the definition of a refugee. A well-founded fear of being persecuted would then involve well-founded fears caused by climate change or other natural hazards. Second, a reform may recognize climate refugees as members of a particular social group who, therefore, should be protected. Third, a reform might create a new treaty that fully recognizes climate refugees. Although these suggestions are not exhaustive, there still exists 'the consensus thus

far … that something must be done to address [the] protection gap' of the Refugee Convention to 'better protect environmental refugees from future harm' (Poon 2017). 'Climigration,' namely 'forced permanent migration of communities due to climate change,' might then, to a greater extent, be avoided (Bronen 2009, 68). Based on my combination of the moral and the legal-political, I support a reform of the Refugee Convention, which would acknowledge climate refugees as refugees. Because dignity is the moral core of this convention, a reform should somehow more effectively protect the dignity of climate refugees. Thus, due to a shared vulnerability and an embodied dignity, people living in small, low-lying, and increasingly uninhabitable island states should have their extreme vulnerability recognized and be safeguarded against moral and legal-political harms generated by such natural disasters as climate change. I think that such a step could contribute to lessening the impact of the legal waiting of future climate refugees.

3.2. Legal ecocentrism

I believe that the issue of climate refugees' legal waiting can be further highlighted by exploring whether the Refugee Convention is based on certain ontological assumptions concerning who are considered legitimate refugees. I here introduce the concept of *legal ecocentrism*. This idea attempts to move this Convention beyond Parekh's anthropocentrism. I argue that such a move is necessary to help prevent the legal waiting of prospective climate refugees. Legal ecocentrism builds on what the legal theorist Anna Grear criticizes as 'juridical anthropocentrism' (2018, 131):

> [W]ithin a wider juridical field, whose subject stands on one side of an *intransigently dualistic ontology*. Indeed, in line with the *dominant Cartesian … suppositions* upon which it rests … law *constructs a series of interrelated, virtually sacred binaries*: man/nature, … public/private, rational/irrational … man/animal, man/woman, culture/nature, white/nonwhite, property owning/nomadic, and so on. At one side of these binaries, there is always a privileged referent: the central-case juridical human being and/or its *assumed properties/characteristics*. (131, emphasis added)

Juridical anthropocentrism is a human-centered approach to law that protects only that which is human. In consequence, nonhuman nature is excluded.

In contrast, however, legal ecocentrism is better equipped to handle today's risks of severe, pervasive, and irreversible impacts of climate change for both humans and the rest of the Earth system, and thus future climate refugees. This is due to the ecocentric understanding of the nature of this approach, which allows for supporting Grear's argument that one should 'extend law's circle of concern to *nonhuman* claimants' (2018, 131, emphasis added). Since climate change affects both human nature (e.g. climate refugees) and nonhuman nature (e.g. ecosystems), legal ecocentrism recognizes nonhuman nature as an affected party. Resultantly, legal ecocentrism is grounded in acknowledging an *ontological-holistic* interconnection of all dimensions of the Earth systems and recognizes them as legally relevant regarding who and/or what should count as affected parties. By moving beyond both anthropocentrism and biocentrism (i.e. the latter of which morally defines nonhuman nature merely as living or biotic components, e.g. animals and plants), legal ecocentrism includes human nature and living and non-living components of nonhuman nature. Thus, as an affected party, legal ecocentrism ascribes moral status to the entire Earth system. One could, then, more adequately reflect on a broader specter of

drivers underlying today's refugee patterns in addition to the current anthropocentric version of the Refugee Convention.

Also, based on the definition of moral addressees as vulnerable, injurable, and affectable, our circle of concern may be expanded by protecting the entire Earth system as such an addressee. I here understand Grear's notion of claimants as equivalent to my definition of affected parties as moral addressees. Because claimants interact through asymmetric, yet mutual relationships, humans, species, or inanimate entities could be viewed as claimants without an agent. Similarly, within legal ecocentrism, to be a claimant only demands being an affected party, for example, concerning climate change.

To my mind, the critique of ontological dualism and juridical anthropocentrism may highlight why the Refugee Convention excludes climate refugees as genuine refugees. If this document originally was formulated within the ontological-dualist framing of juridical anthropocentrism, this may have influenced its law-giving process. Given that, in this specific historical post-world war context, the climate or other parts of nonhuman nature were seemingly not considered relevant categories for why people were fleeing and therefore not included when defining a refugee. However, as climate change and other natural factors increasingly have been, at least partly, causing growing numbers of refugees worldwide, I find it relevant to challenge juridical anthropocentrism. Such an ontological dualism seems to be prima facie inadequate in excluding expected climate refugees in the current climate crisis. Contrary to juridical anthropocentrism, legal ecocentrism suggests that one should reform the current version of the Refugee Convention based on an ecocentric conception of nature. This framework deals more effectively with the interconnection between climate change, which may lead to displacement, and the protection gap concerning future climate refugees, which calls for a reform of this Convention. Moving beyond international refugee law's anthropocentrism, the present protection gap may be better addressed since the former framework proves largely inadequate. Having been established for different objectives, it is limited in its application. Thus, the alternative suggested by legal ecocentrism widens the ontological context for a reform of the present anthropocentric Refugee Convention.

Perhaps one of legal ecocentrism's most important insights for climate refugees is the widening of our scope, identifying destructive feedbacks between the harm done by climate change and biodiversity loss to the entire Earth system, on the one hand, and, on the other, the harm done through the exclusion, exception, displacement, and limbo of climate refugees. In turn, inhabitants of small island states might, to a greater degree than today, themselves engage in struggles against such destructive spirals of legal waiting. Their struggles for recognition may allow them to counteract legal waiting as well as strengthen their awareness-raising, adaptation capacities, and migration preparedness.

4. Natural waiting

Hage's framework of the complexity of waiting connects the concept of natural waiting to humans' 'natural experience of time.' Furthermore, he links such waiting to 'nature.' Hage also describes natural waiting in terms of 'natural cycle[s]' and 'cyclical time' (2009, 6). I suggest, then, that islanders residing in small, low-lying, extremely vulnerable, and increasingly uninhabitable island states should be viewed as finding themselves in a

state of natural waiting while sea levels rise, climate change worsens, and other natural-structural drivers change their prospective circumstance as climate refugees.

Although perceiving natural waiting considering nature, Hage never stipulates which of the earlier introduced approaches to nature he adopts—that is, the anthropocentric, the biocentric, or the ecocentric. In my view, however, to better understand climate refugees' natural waiting, one should explicitly define the concept of nature. Against the backdrop of the IPCC documenting how climate change impacts the entire Earth system, including ecosystems, I propose that the ecocentric concept of nature is the most relevant. This is because that approach provides a fuller picture of the various drivers behind climate change and the diverse impacts these drivers generate, which partly cause the rising number of climate refugees. Further, the natural cycles of natural waiting may be related to planetary cycles (e.g. water, carbon, nitrogen, phosphorus, and sulfur). These cycles are, in turn, part of the Earth system, involving interacting physical, chemical, and biological processes (Dryzek and Pickering 2019). Notably, the Earth system embraces all the climate components (i.e. the atmosphere, hydrosphere, lithosphere, and biosphere) and their natural resources. Regarding this wide range of natural cycles, ecocentrism appears inclusive enough to take account of all these dimensions of natural waiting.

To capture an even clearer picture of natural waiting, I advocate that one considers climate refugees given the Anthropocene. Although this notion is controversial, during the last approximately twenty years, natural scientists, such as Paul J. Crutzen, began to describe our age as a transition from the geological epoch of the Holocene to the Anthropocene (Vetlesen 2015). They portray the impacts (e.g. global warming and biodiversity loss) of human activities (e.g. accelerated exploitation and overshoot) on the atmosphere in the post-industrial revolution era (i.e. during the last nearly 300 years) as so significant for the Earth system and its geology, ecosystems, and climate that they qualify for relabeling our current geological epoch. Given that such temporal dimensions of the Anthropocene (e.g. epoch-generation and acceleration) are ontologically constitutive of, for example, humans, climate refugees' natural waiting should be linked to this new and emerging chronological label through an ecocentric understanding of nature. Although when and why the Anthropocene began is contested, this epoch nonetheless is closely related to the entire Earth system. As mentioned, this includes human nature as well as both living and non-living parts of nonhuman nature (i.e. the interaction between biotic components of biological processes and abiotic components of chemical and physical processes of the entire planet) (Dryzek and Pickering 2019). Thus, I suggest approaching the issue of refugees by considering that natural waiting requires acknowledging the roles that climate change and other natural hazards play because they are some of the main drivers behind today's increasing number of refugees. One then needs a broader understanding of the interaction between the Earth system's climate change and climate refugees of the Anthropocene. In my view, ecocentrism is better equipped to capture this interaction than both anthropocentrism and biocentrism since the latter two outlooks do not consider that nonliving components play key roles in climate change.

The Anthropocene, as a moment of Earth system instability and exploitation, also involves interconnections between natural and human temporalities through complex and non-linear processes. Therefore, the Anthropocene highlights that climate change instigated by 'political and economic orders spanning at most a few centuries, will

make the future less predictable and stable for millennia' (Kelz and Knappe 2021, 1). So, approaching the issue of climate refugees both geologically (e.g. the Anthropocene) and historically (e.g. capitalism) identifies a 'more complex history of political struggles about environmental and socio-economic issues' (7). The Earth system's natural resources are not only limited, but they are also being overexploited, causing the rapid extinction of many of these resources (IPCC 2014). This negatively impacts small island states since they develop 'much of their economic, environmental and social well-being directly or indirectly from the rich natural resources in their immediate environment' (UN 2010, 24). Thus, if these islanders are to continue living sustainable and dignified lives based on the earlier explanation of dignity, they need to struggle against the negative impacts of natural waiting and the further depletion of these limited natural resources.

4.1. Ontological holism

Although I believe that ecocentrism is highly relevant for protecting the limited natural resources of small island states from further depletion, the ecocentric concept of nature seems to conflict with the dominant anthropocentric image of the human-nature relationship captured by Cartesian dualism (Grear 2018). The latter position stipulates an ontological divide between human and nonhuman nature, whereas the former assumes an ontological holism in terms of an interrelationship between these aspects. The 'mechanistic worldview [of Cartesianism] is *deeply embedded* in our *collective psyche*' (Skrbina 2005, 265, emphasis added). This is because '[f]or several hundred years [i.e. during the Anthropocene], the *dominant orthodoxy* has implicitly assumed that inanimate things are fundamentally devoid of mental qualities' (Skrbina 2005, 265, emphasis added). Further, this dualism has become 'integrated into our science, our literature, and our arts' (Skrbina 2005, 265). Finally, it has '*incorporated itself into our deepest social values* and thus become reflected in our *collective actions*' (Skrbina 2005, 265, emphasis added), including how to tackle future climate refugees. Therefore, nature is treated as an '*impersonal thing* or collection of things, without spontaneity, *without intrinsic value*, without 'rights' of any kind' (Skrbina 2005, 265, emphasis added), inversely to how humans are characterized and treated. Consequently, and attributable to this dominant Cartesianism, '[n]atural resources, plant and animal species have been *exploited* for *maximal short-term human benefit*' (Skrbina 2005, 265, emphasis added). Such instrumental treatment is justified on the assumption that nature consists of 'mindless entities [that] are seen as deserving of *no* particular respect or moral consideration' (Skrbina 2005, 265, emphasis added). Instead, '[t]hey exist to be collected, manipulated, dissected, and remade' (Skrbina 2005, 265).

This Cartesianism might yield a similar dualism through an othering of future climate refugees:

> [There exists a] *relation between climate change and human mobility* [or, immobility] by attending to the way in which the figure of human mobility [or, immobility], i.e. the migrant, the *refugee*, asylum seeker, the nomad and so forth *acquires the status of Other within climate change discourse*. (Baldwin 2014, 523, emphasis added)

Moreover, this dualist othering implies that 'the figure of the climate change migrant is *positioned as Other* to, or *different* from, the otherwise unmarked universal subject of

climate change advocacy' (523, emphasis added). Consequently, such dualism can create a divide between 'normal' refugees and 'abnormal' climate refugees (Grove and Zwi 2006, 1933–4). As I see it, this dynamic between climate change, climate refugees, and othering is relevant to the issue of natural waiting. If future climate refugees are viewed as the 'other,' this group might be more disadvantageously subjected to such negative implications of natural waiting as sea levels rise than 'us.' Given that 'we' have the control to construct 'them' as a group different from 'ourselves,' these negative implications will most certainly continue impacting this group. Also, 'we' seemingly secure our own interests vis-à-vis, for example, limited natural resources by distancing and stigmatizing tomorrow's climate refugees as the 'other,' which reinforces our own 'normality.' Therefore, othering might be experienced as marginalization or disempowerment, such as the exclusion of climate refugees by the Refugee Convention.

I argue that the ecocentric notion of nature may challenge natural waiting linked to such dualistic othering of climate refugees. As explained, ecocentrism is a holistic approach that ontologically encompasses both human and nonhuman nature in the widest sense of these terms. Ecocentrism thereby rejects othering of climate refugees because the natural-structural drivers behind these people's natural waiting (e.g. climate change) are viewed as normal within the Anthropocene. So, ecocentrism shows that one should move beyond Cartesianism to better deal with future climate refugees.

4.2. Oceanic cosmopolitanism

In this final subsection, I attempt to show how natural waiting subjects Indigenous communities of small island states in the Pacific Ocean to the othering of climate refugees. To adopt such a regional viewpoint, I base my inquiry on empirical studies by Australian researchers from various disciplines (e.g. human geography, sociology, and political science) and Taukiei Kitara, who is the president of the Tuvalu Community in Brisbane. They have studied activists and artists among Indigenous in the Pacific (e.g. Fiji, Tonga, and Tuvalu) who challenge the status quo of the climate change discourse (Suliman et al., 2019).

Viewed from a post-colonial lens, Indigenous' struggles for recognition appear as a struggle to be socially valued by speaking in their own voices. Instead of speaking for people who can speak for themselves and thereby disvalue them structurally, I wish to be an ally speaking alongside them since hearing them speak for themselves matters. However, despite Indigenous 'disproportionate experience' (Suliman et al. 2019, 300) of climate change impacts, they are '*poorly represented* in global climate politics' (298, emphasis added). This raises the issue of whether they 'represent their own interests and imagine their own futures as pressures to move due to climate change' (298). Here, we should look closer at the potential of Indigenous' 'resilience' and 'resistant politics' (313). As noted, concerning the interchange between climate change and eventual climate refugees, for small islands states, natural drivers, such as climate change-induced rising of sea levels, create a need for climate mobility through migration, displacement, or relocation (299). However, considering my above explanation about how climate refugees' natural waiting is related to the Anthropocene, new (im)mobilities are created (299). Such situations have the 'potential for amplified loss and damage' (304).

Against this backdrop, based on the idea of 'oceanic cosmopolitanism' from below, Indigenous peoples from small island states are safeguarding themselves through resilience and activism. This means 'politicizing (im)mobility,' which 'confronts two mutually reinforcing features of contemporary global climate politics': first, voicelessness due to the '*subordination* of Indigenous peoples, perspectives and worldviews'; second, the '*marginalization* of (im)mobility concerns within the global climate agenda' (Suliman et al. 2019, 298, emphasis added). Oceanic cosmopolitanism wishes to avoid any kind of victimization of people from these places. Rather than being 'portrayed as passive victims waiting to be saved from their sinking islands by benevolent climate cosmopolitans' (304–305), oceanic cosmopolitanism wants to circumvent such 'simplistic' understandings. Rather, this cosmopolitanism highlights how people can themselves struggle against victimization (305). Also, oceanic cosmopolitanism claims that 'there is still much to be done to appreciate complex cultural, social, political and economic attachments to place' (305). By discovering how the above-described Anthropocene (im)mobilities are resiliently being 'contested by Pacific peoples,' therefore, 'we can better understand how' they are '*speaking back* to the global order that continues to contain and dictate responses' to the current planetary climate change (308, emphasis added). Therefore, one should establish ways in which these groups may 'present[-] *their own* struggles against a warming world and for a just future' (308, emphasis added). Thus, oceanic cosmopolitanism wishes to 'challenge the global politics of climate change (in)action' by 'imagin[ing] *other ways* of pursuing climate and mobility justice'' (300, emphasis added). By themselves confronting voicelessness, subordination, and marginalization, this cosmopolitanism underscores that Indigenous peoples themselves 'open space[s] for thinking about alternative ways of navigating the (im)mobility challenges in the Anthropocene' (300) to achieve 'justice, belonging and sustainable futures' (308). Accordingly, such a viewpoint 'insist[s] that the global climate change regime can be remade in a way that seeks to protect rightful places for those whose life-worlds are threatened' by what the IPCC refers to as business as usual of climate change and related natural disasters (300).

As I understand oceanic cosmopolitanism, although situated within the context of Indigenous peoples living on small island states in the Pacific, the *moral core* of this idea can be adopted elsewhere, too. Thus, by listening to and learning from their experiences, voices, practices, and protests, Indigenous' insights could be adopted into the agenda of global discourses on, for example, the interplay between climate change and future climate refugees' natural waiting. As documented by the IPCC, climate change is in part caused by the exploitation of nonhuman nature, which (by being part of a myriad of different interconnected drivers) may trigger the existence of climate refugees.

Perhaps the main challenge here is the lack of recognizing nonhuman nature as having an inherent value that requires nonhuman nature to be protected on a par with human nature. An oceanic cosmopolitanism that is based on an ontological holist and ecocentric understanding of nature might help overcome the dominant Cartesianism, which views nonhuman nature merely as exploitable instead of having intrinsic value. To justify such a normative framework, I suggest that one relate oceanic cosmopolitanism to Val Plumwood's feminist-ethical account of Arne Naess's deep ecology. Plumwood holds that one needs to transcend a similar ontological dualism as the above Cartesianism, which she terms the 'dualistic reason/emotion dichotomy' (1991, 9). Therefore, there

seems to be a close link between Plumwood's eco-feminist ethics and the ontological holism of the ecocentric understanding of nonhuman nature. Plumwood elaborates on her ontological-holistic approach to eco-feminist ethics thus:

> A more promising approach for an *ethics of nature*, and also one much more in line with the current directions in *feminism*, would be to remove rights from the center of the moral stage and pay more attention to some *other, less dualistic, moral concepts* such as respect, sympathy, care, concern, compassion, gratitude, friendship, and responsibility (8–9, emphasis added)

Plumwood further holds that what she identifies as the ontological dualism of '[r]ationalist-inspired ethical concepts' are 'highly ethnocentric and *cannot account adequately* for the [e.g. ethical] views of *many indigenous peoples*' (9, emphasis added). In contrast, Plumwood links her eco-feminist ethics to the importance of listening to and learning from Indigenous peoples—as alluded to above:

> This is based *not on a vague, bloodless, and abstract cosmological concern* but on the formation of identity, social and personal, in relation to *particular areas of land*, yielding ties often as special and powerful as those to kin, and which are equally expressed in very specific and *local responsibilities of care*. (16, emphasis added)

This perspective ostensibly resonates with my above-defined moral core of oceanic cosmopolitanism. Therefore, this feminist outlook involves both particular and universal and can thereby build an ethics for the entire planet. Here, it could be argued that particular practices of care, for example, are always based on asymmetric yet mutual relationships; these practices express, however, the human condition of vulnerability, which morally demands such care from the outset.

Further, Plumwood's eco-feminist ethics is ontologically holistic by including both human and nonhuman nature. According to Plumwood, the moral care of humans toward nonhuman nature is grounded in what she describes as the phenomenon of '*inter*-dependen[ce]' (1991, 20, emphasis added), Such mutual-relational dependency connects human nature to nonhuman nature. This idea of interdependency resonates, I believe, with my ontological-holist argument about being an affected party by virtue of one's vulnerability and injurability. Subsequently, as affectable, both human and nonhuman nature are moral addressees. To protect both these affectable parties' inherent moral value, therefore, does not require that human or nonhuman nature be autonomous agents. Rather, to be recognized and cared for on this basic level expresses the ethical demand of merely protecting others' vulnerability by virtue of an asymmetric yet mutual relationship of dependency.

My eco-feminist approach to oceanic cosmopolitanism proposes, then, an environmental-ethical ideal: to hinder humans' negative impact on nonhuman nature (e.g. raised sea levels, climate change, and biodiversity loss) and its natural-structural temporalities (e.g. natural cycles of Indigenous peoples' practices and the accelerations of the Anthropocene). It also aims to prevent these impacts from further generating future climate refugees' natural waiting or dualist othering by safeguarding their extreme vulnerability, which, as inherent to the human condition, deserves protection. Subsequently, I believe, islanders residing in small island states can themselves improve their awareness-raising, adaptation capacities, and migration preparedness.

5. Conclusion

Considering today's interplay between accelerating planetary climate change and an increasing number of climate refugees, I have explored the issue of waiting in the case of future climate refugees. Hage's framework of the complexity of waiting provides an opportunity to reflect on what I consider the interconnections between existential, legal, and natural waiting. This framework shows possible negative implications of such waiting and possible preventive measures.

I first showed how existential waiting might constitute, for example, meaning loss. However, these negative consequences can be limited by recognizing the vulnerability and injurability of inhabitants of small island states—qualities shared and embodied by all humans. In this way, the inhabitants are recognized as moral addressees in terms of being affected parties. Second, I tried to identify how legal waiting is related to the power of subjecting future climate refugees to exclusion, exception, displacement, and limbo. Due to the exclusion of climate refugees by the Refugee Convention, the idea of legal waiting provides an incentive to consider an ecocentric reform of this significant instrument of international refugee law and protection. Here, one may more effectively challenge the negative impacts of legal waiting for future climate refugees through what I conceptualized as legal ecocentrism than through the current approach of juridical anthropocentrism. Finally, I defined natural waiting as the waiting of prospective climate refugees while rising sea levels, climate change, and other natural-structural drivers behind climate refugees linked to various temporalities of the Anthropocene are evolving. When being exposed to such natural waiting, inhabitants of small island states can be othered through a Cartesian dualism. To prevent such negative impacts of natural waiting, I proposed developing an alternative holistic ontology. Against the horizon of an ecocentric understanding of nonhuman nature, I suggested that one may further develop the moral idea of oceanic cosmopolitanism. I showed how central features of this cosmopolitanism resonate with eco-feminist ethics. With this approach, one may more robustly explain, ethically, why islanders residing in small island states—who often are most affected by climate change-induced rising sea levels—should fight natural waiting by raising their voices in the global discourse on climate refugees.

My goals in this article have aimed to advance a framework that is complex enough to capture what I presuppose is an interconnection between existential, legal, and natural waiting. I suggest that if one does not explore each of these distinct waiting forms—especially their potential negative impacts—within the same framework, one might overlook how they may mutually reinforce each other. Simultaneously, this framework highlights how people can strengthen their awareness-raising, adaptation capacities, and migration preparedness despite these possible negative aspects.

Disclosure statement

Notes on Contributor

Odin Lysaker is a professor of ethics at the University of Agder and he holds a PhD in philosophy from the University of Oslo. Lysaker specializes in natural, moral, and political philosophy.

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