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Continuing to Talanoa: storytelling dialogues for youth engagement in climate action and justice

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Abstract

This article recounts a classroom application of a dialogue, story-telling process used at COPs beginning in 2017. In that year, the Fijian President of the United Nations climate summit, COP23 in Bonn, proposed the entire assembly use his nation's Talanoa Dialogue process for building ambition for national commitments to the Paris Agreement. When youth, women's and Indigenous voices were heard in unprecedented ways, many committed to continuing the practice. A florescence of the Asian-Pacific-inspired, conflict-resolution storytelling and dialogue practice ensued, with some continuing for years afterward. This paper recounts eight rounds of varied Talanoa Dialogues employed in higher education contexts. Purposes ranged from internal team-building, to forging community partnerships, to serving as vehicles for youth representation in international contexts like climate COPs. All dialogues nonetheless prioritized listening, recording, and representation through ethnographic, anthropological lenses. These experiences support recommendations to (1) Create chances for youth to listen empathetically to the stories of others in ways attentive to varied national, ethnic and other intersectional (e.g. gendered, class-based) social locations, expanding their awareness and linking their affective and intellectual selves; (2) Make opportunities for youth to voice their own stories and perspectives on climate challenges and work, considering their developmental trajectories in intergenerational contexts, while emphasizing the need to "scale" from individual through global dimensions; (3) Explore the implications of borrowing from exogenous cultural traditions, considering what factors may render this relatively legitimate, as opposed to appropriative. I explore particularities of the cultural origins of Talanoa Dialogues, which mediate hierarchy and egalitarianism, arguing that this function is especially apt for navigating conundrums of youth leadership and so-called "youth-washing."

Keywords *Talanoa*, Dialogue, Classroom applications, Climate action, Climate justice, Youth, Higher education, Community-based learning, Conflict resolution, Storytelling, Scaling, Cultural appropriation, Legitiamte cultural borrowing

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Introduction: Talanoa dialogues taken global

It was 2017, and the newly elected United States' president, Donald Trump, had just withdrawn the US from the Paris Accord. For many climate activists and policymakers, odds that we could be on track to meet the goals of the agreement slipped from already-slim to virtually none. The Paris Agreement to contain global climate change was but two years old, and already looking precarious.

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Also in 2017, Fijian Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama was serving as President of the United Nations climate summit, COP23 (23rd Conference of the Parties), based in Bonn, Germany. He proposed the entire assembly use his nation's Talanoa Dialogue process for building ambition for strong Nationally Determined Contributions to mitigation and adaptation, as set out by the Paris Agreement. Those assembled broke into hundreds of story-telling circles, taking hours to listen to one another's lived experiences of climate change, and efforts to raise ambitions for both mitigation and adaptation efforts. Through these sessions emerged broad agreement that youth, women's and Indigenous voices were heard in unprecedented ways; as a result many committed to continuing the practice. A florescence of the Asian-Pacific-inspired, conflict-resolution storytelling and dialogue practice ensued—mostly to provide inputs for COP24, but with some continuing long afterward.

This article recounts one group's application of Talanoa Dialogues to higher education contexts, initially as part of that commitment to convene dialogues in the wake of COP23, but eventually manifesting 10 rounds of quite varied Talanoas. Purposes ranged from internal team-building, to community-facing, to serving as vehicles for youth representation in international contexts like climate COPs; all dialogues nonetheless prioritized listening, recording, and representation through ethnographic, anthropological lenses. (1) Create chances for youth to listen empathetically to the stories of others in ways attentive to varied national, ethnic and other intersectional (e.g. gendered, class-based) social locations, expanding their awareness and linking their affective and intellectual selves; (2) Make opportunities for youth to voice their own stories and perspectives on climate challenges and work, considering their developmental trajectories in intergenerational contexts, while emphasizing the need to "scale" from individual through global dimensions; (3) Explore the implications of borrowing from exogenous cultural traditions, considering what factors may render this relatively legitimate, as opposed to appropriative.

In the sections that follow, I first detail the initial introduction of Talanoas into COPs and climate work. Second, I consider their function in their "native," Polynesian contexts, and how this translates into international forums, focusing in particular how the Talanoa Dialogues mediate hierarchy and egalitarianism in both settings, and arguing that this function is especially apt for navigating conundrums of youth leadership in international climate work. Subesequent sections turn to the varies application of Talanoas in my anthropology courses, and the ways in which they offer students an initiation into climate work, as well as a means of orienting their own roles and contributions going forward.

Talanoa dialogues take COP23 by storm

President Prime Minister Bainimarama's proposal that the entire conference engage in Fijian-style *Talanoa Dialogue*s, which are one of a number of legendary story-sharing and conflict resolution processes from the Polynesian region so well-known to political anthropologists, was embraced to an extent few could have predicted. In Fijian, Samoan, Tongan and other Austronesian-speaking languages, *tala* means "talking or telling stories," while *noa* refers to "zero or without concealment" [1]. The process, then, focuses on building relationships and empathy, and finding shared understanding and ways of constructively moving forward together, without blame-laying or recrimination.

"Talanoa Dialogues utterly transformed this COP," one colleague, fresh back from Bonn, recounted. "Youth, Indigenous and women's voices were heard in a way they hadn't been before – there was a clear shift away from 'UN-ese' [or, United-Nations-speak] as usual." In Bonn, three questions were offered to structure Talanoas, with the suggestion to focus on whichever was most fitting: Where are we? Where do we want to go? How do we get there?

Talanoa story-telling was aimed at intervening in "the usual positioning and bickering between developed and developing nations." Several of the technical negotiations at COP23 decisively remained "Talanoa-free zones," attesting to the depth of these preexisting cleavages [2]. All the same, proposing a dialogue process responded to increasing recognition that subnational (actors affiliated with anything but a country's national government), multi-level governance and civil society involvement – all adding pressure from below -- would be necessary to adhere to the Paris Agreement goals [3, 4]. Indeed, subnationals could pick up where national governments fall short or withdraw, as was the case not only for state governors showing up in Bonn to represent the United States [5], but also parallel movements in Colombia, Germany, South Africa, Mexico and Myanmar [6].

In effect, in what might be considered one of climate-action's darkest hours and against all odds, participants left Bonn reinvigorated and inspired to build greater ambition for setting high Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) for climate action, and to close in on finalizing the sole unfinished article of Paris (Article 6), dealing with NDC assessment. Resolving to hold Talanoas everywhere in the subsequent year, from grassroot settings to other international summits, actors

succeeded in convening hundreds of Talanoas in the year heading into COP24 in Katowice, Poland. UNFCCC gathered inputs and compiled them so as to inform those talks. Most of these dialogues focused on NDCs, yet as each reflected particular contexts, experiences, priorities and values, many addressed sustainability and environmental justice issues in holistic, and highly varied, ways.

What was behind this impressive surging of motivation, and subsequent mobilizations? It was far from the first time that facilitative dialogue was called upon in UN or climate COP contexts. The 2017 and 2018 Talanoas continued a commitment in Paris for a facilitative dialogue to follow the 2015 treaty, which itself continued previous similar processes with host's cultural frameworks, such as the Zulu-inspired *Indaba*, or tribal council, observed in 2011 during COP17 in Durban, South Africa. Most recently, in yet another version, COP28 host country United Arab Emirates invited negotiators to participate in *majlis*, or traditional Arab circles of trust. I argue, however, that the Talanoa Dialogues offer singular value for promoting climate awareness, engagement and action, as evidenced by the fact that none of these other practices have, so far, demonstrated the kind of enduring usage that Talanoa Dialogues have. The convergence of a propitious historical and political moment, with characteristics of Talanoa Dialogues that help participants – and youth in particular – to find their own insertion points and voices, and to navigate the formidable individual-to-global scaling problem that climate represents, together help explain their utility and staying power for so many global actors.

Colorado College Student Lucy Kramer (center) tells her Talanoa at COP28, with Aliyu Sadiq (Founder and CEO of Ecocykle, Nigerian coordinator of Climate Clock, Nigeria) on left. In forground at right is Fijian human rights leader Rex Hanoi, who currently serves as Climate Change Envoy for Monash University. (Photo by Jasmine Sone)

Talanoa: from Polynesian to International contexts

Descriptions of an international policy summit breaking out into Polynesian-inspired story-sharing circles invoke, for many, stereotypes of relaxed, casual, copacetic island life. As anthropologist Steven Kirsch points out, however, in Fijian and other south Pacific contexts, the role Talanoa Dialogues play is anything but a *continuation* of egalitarian, leveled-power relations. Rather, most traditional Polynesian societies are noted for being extremely hierarchical chiefdoms or kingdoms, where one is born into an ascribed rank – royal, aristocrat, commoner. In this light, he asserts that "…*talanoa* included practices that temporarily *mitigate differences in hierarchy and rank*, which help to facilitate the formation of consensus, a process sometimes referred to as 'The Pacific Way.'" (my italics) [7].

Talanoa processes have varied applications. Traditionally associated with kava drinking and ceremonies such as rites of passage or installing new chiefs [7], they have also been employed as a culturally rich research methodology [8], and as a mediation process following the Fijian coup of 2000 [1]. Noting the highly formalized recognition of hierarchy in traditional, kava-drinking Talanoas in Fiji, Kirsch contrasts these with the presentation of Talanoa as an "open and participatory style of interaction" at COPs, suggesting this represents an "invented tradition" or even an "inversion of tradition" for a markedly different context [7].

Alternatively, Kirsch explores the notion that "… hierarchy and egalitarian relationships are *not mutually exclusive*" (my italics) [7] and that chiefly power in Fiji is equally dependent upon egalitarian relationships between horizontal kin as upon ascriptive hierarchies. He offers Samoan scholar GB Milner's hypothetical example: "'The chief is talking to (me, us, etc.) *as if* we were his equals'., suggesting that one of the properties of talanoa is the ability to temporarily mitigate differences in rank" [7].

In this light, Kirsch understands the Talanoa Dialogue's introduction into climate efforts and negotiations as more than a case of cultural appropriation or a Fijian "branding exercise," but as an "ideological project of encompassment" – enjoining those in power and those more marginalized – "…for addressing one of the most consequential challenges of our time, global climate change" [7]. In view of the fact that national commitments for greenhouse gas mitigation and adaptation cannot be mandated, but remain voluntary and consensus-based, it is critical to continue a dynamic of collaboration, and avoid criticizing or ostracizing nations who hesitate or fall behind [7]. Talanoa Dialogues, by centering specific, lived experiences, relationship-building and trust [9], offer a framework of encompassment that retains an identifiably "Pacific" spirit. As participants from COP23 fanned out to their home countries across the globe, the primary impetus for holding subsequent Talanoas at all levels was, again, to increase ambition for Nationally

Determined Contributions for emission reductions – “Five times more ambition, five times more action,” Frank Bainimarama admonished, in order to meet the 1.5-degree target by 2100 [10]. The UNFCCC’s reporting about inputs from Talanoas in the lead-in to COP24 in Katowice testifies to the energy and widespread participation behind the effort:

> *A total of 473 inputs were uploaded to the Talanoa Dialogue platform… Of the 44 inputs submitted by 156 Parties, 24 were submitted by individual Parties and 20 by groups of Parties. The remaining 429 inputs were submitted by non-Party stakeholders. Civil society accounts for the largest share of non-Party stakeholder inputs (121, or 28 per cent), closely followed by academia and research organizations (94, or 22 per cent). Inputs submitted by mixed partnerships and coalitions (69) and by the private sector (62) each represent close to 15 per cent of all inputs from non-Party stakeholders. International organizations submitted 37 (9 per cent), subnational governments 32 (7 per cent), United Nations bodies 12 (3 per cent) and UNFCCC constituted bodies 2 (0.5 per cent) [11].*

Dialogues focused exclusively on NDCs, however, were far from the only forms that this florescence of Talanoa-inspired dialogues took. Similarly, many have continued to dialogue in this framework well beyond 2018 and COP24.

Talanoa for Engaging Youth in Grassroot Community contexts

From the moment I learned of the impact of Talanoas at Bonn in 2017, I began collaborating with attendees to plan ways of incorporating Talanoa Dialogues as community-based learning (CBL) components of several anthropology courses I teach at Colorado College, a selective, four-year undergraduate institution. The earliest of these were submitted to the UNFCCC as inputs, but we found the framework generative enough to continue to employ it in multiple contexts and from varied angles. These included:

In a course entitled “Anthropocene,” which broadly focuses on the changing meanings of being human at a time of climactic crisis, students co-hosted dialogues with a community partner, Crestone/Baca Resilience network (C/BR). Sixteen stories responded to the prompt, “What is your ‘Getting There’ story?”, referring to the goals the C/BR work groups had set. Students then “curated” these Talanoa stories, transcribing them and adding a reflection & commentary. Most striking in these reflections were students’ realizations about the relativity of older and younger generations. As one wrote, “I realize I’ve placed our elders in a fixed position; hearing about their confrontations with the Vietnam War, militarization, coal mining, the Dakota Access Pipeline, and more, and how they inform their current resiliency work, was humbling. I realized some day I’ll be an elder, facing questions from youth about, ‘What did you do?’”.

Students gathered for a Talanoa Dialogue in 2019 in Crestone, Colorado, USA (photo by author)

In an advanced “Religion and Ritual” seminar, students return from 24-hour homestays with hosts from various spiritual centers (including Sufi, Shinto-based, Zoroastrian, and various Buddhist and Indigenous groups). In pairs with their hosts, students shared out to the broader group, Talanoa-style, what they had learned about how particular spiritual traditions and practices inform “staying with the trouble” [12] of climate and wider environmental crisis. A memorable example of student learning involved two quite secular-rationalist students who stayed at Shumei, a Shinto-based, emergent Japanese spiritual organization. One wrote, “I realized my bias against ‘religions’ (even though Shumei adherents don’t consider it a religion) had me dismissive of their knowledge and practices. Learning about Shumei’s commitment to natural agriculture – and how it can serve climate mitigation efforts – was truly eye-opening!”

In 2020, when all classes went online due to the pandemic, the “Anthropocene” course took our Talanoas into cyberspace, which enabled quite diverse, including international, participation. Deepening a standing, substantive unit on the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), each student group focused on a particular goal. For example, in the months just following the police killing of African-American George Floyd, the group working with SDG16, Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions, zeroed their Talanoa in on the target 16.1: “Significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere” Training the concern with violence reduction on police brutality in particular, this group documented the beginnings of activists forming local citizens’ committees for police oversight. The relevance to climate, as articulated

by the students, followed the chant, "No Justice, No Peace" – without social justice, there could not be environmental justice, without environmental justice, no meaningful or sustainable climate action could result. Importantly, across the SDG-focused dialogues, the intersectional and holistic complexity that the SDGs themselves are designed to encompass was continually thrown into relief.

The variability of these dialogues demonstrates how broadly their foci and applicability might range, while at the same time continuing to loop back to sustainability and climate concerns. Most recently, however, our Talanoas have cleaved more closely to climate concerns, explicitly. A 2022 dialogue, for example, focused on the ahead-of-schedule closure of a coal-burning power plant in downtown Colorado Springs, asking what enabled, and how to build on, that success. Three recent dialogues were COP-facing: one during COP26 in Glasgow and experiences of youth engaging the summit from afar. At both COP27 in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt, and COP28 in Dubai, UAE, we held in-person dialogues with youth delegates, focused on discerning the kinds of efforts and partnerships where they could make the greatest impact and/or learn most effectively.

Talanoa as initiation: youths voicing their stories

The Talanoas I now detail involve stories told, for the first time, internally to the class, to their own classmates (plus instructor/s and whatever guests we might have joining). I discovered, somewhat unwittingly, that this method offered cohorts of young-adult, serious students a form of initiation into community or "public" engagement with climate-focused sustainability work on a level I'd not seen before. In order to explain how and why, I need first to set the stage a bit, further contextualizing my approach to teaching climate, and how the Talanoa Dialogues fit in.

I came upon this internal-to-the-class format by accident; previously, I'd prioritized Talanoas engaging community members and organizations, as in the iterations discussed above. In the first instance, in the fall of 2021, it was for purely logistical reasons. At Colorado College, we teach on an intensive/immersive format called the block plan, where students take, and professors teach, just one class at a time. Class meets daily for about three hours; four sequential blocks equal a semester. My 200-level "Anthropocene" (Anthropology/Environmental Studies) course was scheduled for the semester's third block, during November, and thus coincided with COP26 in Glasgow, Scotland (and after that COP had been postponed for a year, due to the Coronavirus pandemic). We were just coming out of the Talanoa rounds focused on the SDGs that were wholly online, for which students called upon experts the world over as remote participants. Now, for the mere fact that we thought the many experts we'd most like to call upon would be justifiably busy in or focused on Glasgow and unavailable, we contemplated convening our Talanoas internally. Admittedly, I had my doubts: would these students have "enough" to talk about? And what about the objections some might make about college students already being all-too inward-looking, even unto solipsism?

Yet, my entire approach to climate education already suggested the all-internal format might work. By the time I came to climate work, beginning in earnest around 2015, my environmental science-and-studies colleagues, as well as others across the curriculum, had most necessary educational "niches" largely covered. My previous research, as a feminist political anthropologist, had focused on such dimensions of violence as policing intimate partner violence, and military/war-based trauma. Climate change, as slow violence [13], was less of a lane change than I originally anticipated. I began developing the courses mentioned above, and "Anthropocene" in particular (which is cross-listed as anthropology and environmental studies), with a focus on attending to the affective, relational, and ontological dimensions of climate crisis – for this appeared to be a need still largely unfulfilled. On its most basic level, the Anthropocene course asked questions like: What does it mean to be human in the midst of anthropogenic catastrophe? How do we navigate our devastation and grief in the face of what we know, averting longer-term paralysis and despair? How do we cultivate responsiveness – or response-abilities, as Haraway [12] and others have proffered? Each question translated into corresponding learning objectives. Suffice to say, these differed sharply from those in any course I'd taught previously.

It bears revealing, too, that I incorporated previous practices of "light" ritualizing into our Talanoa dialogues. This stemmed from years of teaching about ritual and symbolism, spirituality and religion and arriving at the conviction that it was problematic (and a missed opportunity), from decolonial/antiracist/feminist anthropological lenses, to study ritualization academically, including that of "exotic others" – the presumed, stereotypic territory of cultural anthropology -- without recognizing and even enacting our own, universally human, "rituals" (aka symbolic expressions of emotion and/or meaning). So, I'd long enjoined students in light, playful, and secular ritualizing, as part of their educational experiences.

Each day, then, before a speaker would begin their story, we would ring a chime. We allowed some silence to settle. as the reverberations slowly faded. On the first day, we began with stories from my COP-veteran guest co-instructor, Myra Jackson (often given remotely, though by now she was a regular "Mindfulness Fellow" in CC's Creativity and Innovation office) and myself. These two

served as a gateway, offering examples of how one might go about it.

On the second day, I would invite alumni of the course or course fellows, who would offer two additional stories. Beginning with these four, veteran stories now offered variety to the students. They saw that someone might speak more extemporaneously, whereas another carefully wrote out what she would say, and still another might memorize and even perform, spoken-word style, his Talanoa. Accompanied by an assemblage of readings about Talanoa, these gateway stories also recognized and honored the origins and history of how the Talanoa had been offered by Fiji to COPs, as well as how they came to Colorado College. Mindful of issues of authenticity and appropriation, we underlined Fijians's gift for a cause that their nation (like other island states) has distinct stakes in, and that our "Talanoa-inspired" dialogues doubtless had much to learn, still, about more in-depth and legitimately Pacific Islander approaches to the practice.

How many of the students' stories began with some version of, "I didn't really think I had anything to say, or any story to tell. But now, after listening to all of you…"? Many of their Talanoas involved climate change and violent weather events directly. A Chinese student expressed remorse about her former, childhood delight at "typhoon no-school days"; as storms grew progressively more serious, she came to understand their real tolls on people and endangered communities. A student told of joining the school trip for hurricane cleanup in Florida for fun and socializing, only to realize the suffering and pain visited upon victims. Several students were survivors of violent floods, wildfires and mudslides; many more offered observations of how it just doesn't snow like it used to, and so on. One talked about visits to her Ethiopian relatives and seeing their care with conserving water, and asked why she, raised in the similarly drought-ridden American West, was not taught such practices.

Students' stories bespoke silences and omissions, too: one from rural South Carolina in the US detailed how climate and weather were expressly *not* to be spoken of in terms of *global* change in her community. Another, raised conservative evangelical in Colorado (US), painstakingly explained how he was until recently an active and vehement climate change denialist, and how that had shifted, suspending him in between world views separated by chasms.

Other students' stories ranged freely and far, connecting climate injustice to sexual harassment, assault and objectification; enslavement, sharecropping, redlining and racism; colonial legacies, migration stories and multicultural identities; mental illness, homelessness and hunger -- all in ways that only made sense through the circuitous, real and rich connections that true-life stories can draw. They reflected experiences from across the United States, as well as lines of living in and/or having heritage ties to Pakistan and France, India and Myanmar, Hong Kong and Columbia, to name just a few.

Activists' stories were prominent, from chronicling reforestation efforts--e.g. bird, turtle and entangled sea-mammal rescues--and starting community gardens; to organizing climate marches, Green Deal campaigns, and work in organizations such as Sunrise and Extinction Rebellion. Perhaps unsurprisingly, these accounts from those with more seasoned involvement in climate and environmental issues in particular often revealed the sharpest struggles with anger, frustration and disillusion, and the deepest need for emotional expression and renewal. The challenges and paradoxes raised were formidable, and all- too real; we didn't pretend they would be resolved over the course of the class, or through dialogues or story-sharing alone.

What the practice of sharing Talanoas did bring to these participants, however, was the reminder that these experiences are lived, at least in the first order, one life at a time. To be taken in by others, by community, it's the individual narrative that rings most true. We remember we are conscious, reasoning selves embedded in discreet (albeit holobiont) biological, mortal bodies. We remember that even as we strive to discover ourselves as world citizens that we are first feeling-and-acting individuals embedded in structures larger than ourselves: communities, regions and nations, but also economies, geo-political landscapes, "capitalist ruins" [14]. We are attempting to "share" a planet with human and more-than-human alike which, according to Bruno Latour [15], in the 1980s global elites recognized no longer has "enough world" left for everyone (while protecting their large cuts).

Navigating scale, forefending despair

In light of lessons learned through our Talanoa Dialogue circles, and these latter, inward-facing circles, most of all, I offer the following three recommendations. Talanoa can serve to:

1) Create chances for youth to listen empathetically to the stories of others, expanding their awareness and linking their affective and intellectual selves.

   This linkage is, I submit, one antidote to the lamentations that somehow, despite all we know, so far the policy and scientific groundwork for climate action has been insufficient. It is in both listening deeply and giving of oneself that the affective and dispositional foundations for sustainable climate work can be built, including the kinds of sweeping, committed and impassioned social movements that bolster our

intellectual and professional knowledge and understandings.

2) Make opportunities for youth to voice their own stories and perspectives on climate challenges and work, considering their developmental trajectories in intergenerational contexts, while emphasizing the need to "scale" from individual through global dimensions.
 There are many ways to characterize how the sheer scale of climate challenges can be elusive and overwhelming. One that speaks to me comes from economist Robert Stavins, who considers a combination of two aspects: *spatial* – e.g. *where* emissions are produced, or reduced, doesn't matter, as both are distributed globally; and *temporal* – the real benefits of reductions apply to the future, to our descendants, but costs come now. In other words, doing something doesn't fit into our habitual, short-term, capitalist-driven, I-get-a-timely-return-out-of-my-investment logic. This "intertemporal asymmetry" makes climate change an exceedingly difficult political problem, one which points to the moral and ethical dimensions, as well as to recognition of the atmosphere as global commons [16].

For young people coming into awareness with our climate problem already grievously advanced, telling a Talanoa and articulating one's own location within the vast scale can provide a starting place, a point of insertion. I invoke the quasi-ritualistic sense of *initiation* because the questions are affectively and ontologically charged, and turning toward them – and not away – is of such vital importance. That Talanoas serve in Polynesian contexts as a form of conflict resolution is also relevant, as intergenerational relations around conflict change can be riven with tensions. More than once I've seen young people bristle when being told the problem was theirs to solve; they have read this as off-loading onto youth. Too, superficial efforts to brand participation as youth-lead but where youth haven't felt listened to or empowered have led to accusations of youth-washing. Emphasizing and exercising intergenerational partnerships has proved a productive alternative to these pitfalls.

Similarly aiding with contextualizing efforts has been what anthropologists often refer to as scaling, or considering levels of activity from micro- (individual) through meso- (community) to macro- (nation) and (international) global. For youth in particular, scaling climate engagement from micro- through global is heady and vertiginous business; no one can be attending to all the strands at once, rather, one must identify a path while recognizing that singularity within a spectacularly complex whole. This parallels, it's worth noting, the interpenetrating structure of the SDGs themselves: no one stands on its own. But, identifying the discrete goals, targets and indicators, as well as their specific connections to other goals' components, is the essential strategy behind attempting to address the complex whole, through breaking it into smaller, more approachable parts.

Just as it's no coincidence that in Polynesia processes like Talanoa are tied to conflict resolution that mediates hierarchy and egalitarianism [7], neither is it a coincidence that so many of the students' stories invoked here involve persistent inequities along generational, class, gendered, racial and ethnic, and national lines. To ignore how inequities translate into experiences of injustice, and thereby infuse climate work with both love and rage, hope and despair, is to reproduce frameworks that bypass affect, meaning, and even what is genuinely at stake.

Youth, as a constituency, have multifaceted positioning within climate conversations and organizing. In any here-and-now setting, youth symbolize "the future" writ large (even after their own lifetimes). At the same time, they also are the literal legacy-bearers of today's cumulative efforts and initiatives. We make much of promoting youth leadership, but perhaps don't give adequate attention to intergenerational partnerships in support of leaders of many ages. Because youth are often newer on scenes and with less longevity as leaders, overemphasizing exclusively youth-led work can inadvertently come to feel like work and responsibility is being off-loaded onto youth, or that "youth-washing" is occurring, where something is branded as youth-led for good optics, but in reality is not, nor accountable to actual youth concerns or demands [17].

Too, unlike other demographic differences, age is the equal-opportunity index: stick around long enough, and youth become elders. While younger citizens may perceive their elders as monopolizing or all-powerful, an only slightly longer-term view reveals how today's elders are yesterday's youth, who also often have felt saddled with problems not of their making. Relational and collaborative, rather than oppositional and essentializing, frameworks are crucial for navigating this terrain. Talanoa Dialogues, again, provide optimal opportunities for initiations, as well as points of reflection and renewal further along the path, for such work.

3) Explore the implications of borrowing from exogenous cultural traditions, considering what factors may render this relatively legitimate, as opposed to appropriative.

Story telling is a growing and lively methodology with increasing visibility in research, activist/interventionist and pedagogical applications alike. As I mention above, various host countries have introduced their own deliberative and dialogue practices, with story-telling dimensions, into COPs as well. In view of this fact, what is the rationale behind "importing" Talanoa-inspired praxis into the work I chronicle in this article? How might we assess whether is does justice to Fijian intentions when Talanoa was brought into global climate work during COP23 in 2017?

I find today's students in higher education—and perhaps anthropology students in particular–increasingly sensitive to, and concerned with, issues of cultural appropriation, and especially how these might related to colonial legacies and persistent inequities. This is all to the good, and something I anticipate will continue to percolate into their wider societies. In this light, the history of the Talanoa coming into climate work presents an interesting case for asking: where does legitimate borrowing end, and cultural appropriation begin?

Every time I have applied Talanoa Dialogues in a classroom context, I have invited students to enjoin this question. The resulting rich discussions and analyses are striking, students themselves say, because for once they find grounds to refrain from simply stamping a cultural practice that moves – even from a relatively less powerful positionality (Fiji offered the Talanoa Dialogues directly in response to their perceived endangerment, after all) to a relatively more powerful one in the United States – as automatically being a case of appropriation. For them, it has first and foremost mattered that Fiji offered the Talanoa; it was not taken from them without consent or consultation. We discuss how some refer to Fiji's gift of the Talanoa to the COP process of raising ambition for national goals, but how it might be more accurately thought of as a loan (economistic implications notwithstanding): it was and is, continually [10] presented very much in hopes of return on the offering in terms of meaningful mitigation, adaptation, and loss and damage climate financing. While we might have turned to storytelling practices that have emerged in Colorado or elsewhere more "native" to our origins, students have found it meaningful, and important, that Talanoa reminds us that distant Pacific Islanders have deep stakes in what we do, or fail to do. For me, personally, I've discovered the line to be whether our Talanoa talks were geared, ultimately and *specifically*, toward climate action and climate justice. In cases where Talanoa's applications were oriented toward environment or sustainability more generally, including my own applications, with hindsight and reflection, I've come to see those as doing less "justice" to the Fijian gift/loan.

Conclusion: continuing to Talanoa, and not alone

When we were invited to hold a press conference in 2022 at COP27 in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt about our Talanoa work, we entitled it "Continuing to Talanoa." For, Fijians and other Pacific-Islander originators of the practice aside, we had the impression that Talanoa had perhaps faded from global-to-local, climate-based settings, having run its course. Mention of ongoing Talanoa work on UNFCCC platforms largely disappeared after 2018; we wondered if were the only ones still convening them.

No, we would soon be gratified to learn, we were not. The day we arrived in Sharm el-Sheikh, we received a late-breaking invitation to a day-long "Interfaith Gathering in the Spirit of Talanoa Dialogue" before the opening of COP27[1], and the same group repeated an interfaith Talanoa on the eve of COP28 in Dubai. Too, slower-to-emerge academic publications revealed ongoing Talanoa practices. In addition to Stuart Kirsch's ongoing work already discussed [[7], see also [18]], Chai and Qi use Talanoa analyses to showcase China's approaches and commitments to climate [19], and Isatis Cintron-Rodrigues et al. [20] offer a Talanoa-based, practical guide to support the implementation of the Paris initiative ACE (Action for Climate Empowerment), in order to accelerate just climate action.

Here, I have argued that Fiji's offering of the Talanoa process to serve the goals of climate action and justice, in line with the Paris Agreement, has had far-reaching relevance and utility. Just as Talanoa Dialogues have helped mitigate hierarchy and rank in Fiji, the dialogues offer ways to mitigate generational and other hierarchies for youth, particularly as their positionalities intersect with other marginalized statuses. Telling and listening to Talanoas offer youth initiation-like starting points for engagement, promote empathy and cross-cultural, -national and -sectoral understandings; additionally, they can help youth navigate the tensions, scale and ontological magnitude that accompany our climate challenges.

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Authors' contributions

Single-authored.

[1] See https://www.oikoumene.org/news/interfaith-dialogue-promotes-holistic-reflection-on-climate-change-on-eve-of-cop27-in-egypt (consulted Sept. 29, 2023).

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Availability of data and materials
The datasets during and/or analysed during the current study available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate
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Competing interests
I have no competing interests.

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